

# キノの旅 III

the Beautiful World

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電撃文庫







t h e B e a u t i f u l W o r l d

# キノの旅 Ⅲ

時雨沢恵一

Illustration: 黒星紅白



 電撃文庫

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-the Beautiful World-  
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by Keiichi Sigsawa

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**Frontispiece: The Country of Love and Peace | -  
Power Play-**

# キノの旅Ⅲ

— the Beautiful World —

時雨沢 恵一

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My name is Riku. I am a dog. I am on a journey with my master Shizu. This is the story of when we visited a certain country.

“What is that?” Master Shizu asked in surprise from the driver’s seat when he saw the country.

Most countries were walled off to protect their inhabitants and their property from the outside world. But this one had nothing but low wooden fences to keep out wild animals.

Master Shizu met with the country’s ruler to ask if they had a military so powerful that they did not need any walls. But the ruler smirked.

“We have no such barbaric organizations in our country.”

“Then how do you protect your people?” Master Shizu asked, a little emotional. As expected from a prince.

The ruler replied as though speaking to a backwards barbarian.

When Master Shizu asked if the country had never been invaded, the ruler responded, “We’ve been invaded more times than I can count on my hands and feet. But each time, we handled the matter peacefully. And we will continue to do so. This is why we have no need for an organization of killers, or walls that cut us off from the wonderful view of Mother Nature.”

Master Shizu still looked dubious. The ruler replied with head held high, “Our country has a paean of love and peace. By singing this paean, we emerge victorious without spilling a single drop of blood.”

“I feel unsettled. It’s almost like using the bathroom with the door unlocked,” is what Master Shizu said about staying in this country. He seemed to want to leave as soon as possible, but we were forced to remain for some time to get the buggy repaired.

One morning, there was a commotion.



The country received word that a neighboring country had crossed the plains to attack. The enemy had sent a messenger and unilaterally declared that they would invade the next morning.



With an amused smile, the ruler came to Master Shizu and said in a mocking tone, “Let us show you our wondrous victory. I can scarcely wait for tonight.”

That night, we could see lights from the enemy camp beyond the wooden fences surrounding the country. There was a large platform set up before the fences. It was lit by torches. The ruler prepared Master Shizu a seat next to the platform. Master Shizu sat there with his beloved sword at his side. I sat between his feet.

The enemy forces marched with practiced discipline and stood imposingly before the platform.

“Savage beasts who know naught but violence. You invade us again, knowing your defeat is certain.” The ruler snorted and gave an order to the subordinates.

“If we have to escape, you know what to do,” Master Shizu whispered to me.

A group of people went up to the platform. From the way they dressed, they could only be a choir.

A conductor suddenly led them into song. They hummed a slow, relaxed melody.

Then a beautiful woman in extravagant clothing stood at the front of the stage and sang a lovely aria.

The lyrics spoke of the greatness of love and peace, and the foolishness of war. It called on all men to lay down their arms and take up farming tools. Master Shizu seemed to have a headache from attempting to fight off his drowsiness.

That was when a great change swept over the enemy forces. They put down their weapons and began to move to the melody with smiles on their faces. The troops cheered loudly for the singer and began to chatter excitedly.

“See, Traveler? They no longer wish for war. The paeon of love and peace has changed their hearts. —Hm? I see. —Traveler, we’ve just received word that the enemy forces have decided to retreat. They thanked us for the music. I suppose it’s time to reward the performance with some good food and drink. Why not lay down your weapon as well, Traveler?”

Master Shizu watched the singer's impassioned performance, the strangely excited enemy troops, and the gloating ruler, and fell into thought.

The repairs to the buggy were completed the next morning. Master Shizu and I left at once. Around afternoon, we happened across the troops from the previous evening, resting on the plains. Master Shizu glared at a soldier pointing a persuader at him and threatened him back.



“Are you planning to shoot me? Are you the commander of these forces? If



not, you might find yourself in trouble with your superiors should you choose to act without orders.”

About five repetitions of the threat later, we were allowed an audience with the commander. He gave us a perfunctory apology for his men’s insolence.

Master Shizu stated clearly that we were travelers and that we had no intention of going back to the unwalled country. Then he said, “You had no intention of attacking that country to begin with, did you?”

The commander nodded, smiling. “That’s correct. The mock invasion last night was a way for us to boost the troops’ morale. The men don’t give a second thought to the lyrics, and they have no idea that we even declared an invasion against that country. For them, last night was simply a celebration. We told them that a vassal state was holding a party out of gratitude for our protection. Of course, we ordered the men to be silent before the music began.”

“I see. Then who is your real opponent?”

“The powerful country across the mountain range. An evil land with an unforgivable system of governance. It is our noble duty to eradicate them from the face of the world. If they invade our vassal state, we will have a justification to start an all-out war. Justice and victory are both on our side.”

As soon as we returned to the buggy, I asked Master Shizu if we would visit the country that sent these troops. He shook his head.

“I’d rather not get involved with countries that love or don’t understand war.”

“Both are not easy to find.”

“You’re right. ...I’m sorry we have to keep wandering like this, Riku.”



Master Shizu leaned on the steering wheel, looking up at the clear blue sky.

“It does not bother me, Master Shizu. My place is always at your side,” I confessed. Master Shizu turned.

After a moment of silence, he put on his usual gentle smile.

“Let’s go.”

“Of course, Master Shizu.”

As usual, he started the buggy.





Aware or unaware or aware?

-Where is the terminal?-

# Prologue: In the Clouds ▪ B | -Blinder ▪ B-

It was blinding.

Above and below and right and left, the world was white as far as the eye could see.

A low wind howled like the moan of a massive animal.

“Wait,” said a boyish voice, “can you see?” he asked into the opaque world.

“No. I can’t see a thing,” a slightly higher-pitched voice answered.

“Visibility is practically zero here. We shouldn’t move for a while,” said the first voice.

The other voice briefly voiced agreement and said, “It really is impossible to see in these conditions.”

“It is,” replied the first voice.

The wind shrieked for a moment before falling into a low howl again.

“But we’ll be able to see soon,” said the second voice.

“Yeah,” said the first voice.

At that moment, the world of white seemed to tremble. It began to clear slightly from upwind.

“Imagine this clears and we don’t see anything in front of us. Wouldn’t that make you feel kind of glad?” asked the first voice.

“Yeah. But that’s not possible.”

“What’ll you do when we can move again?”

“I don’t know. There’s not much I can do here. So we’ll just head off. That’s all.”

“Not everyone here could do that, though,” said the first voice.



“Yeah. If only they had that small bit of knowledge. If only someone had given them that little piece of information. Or if only we’d gotten here a day earlier.”

“It’s sad.”

“Yeah. And the same goes for me. There might be something I don’t know, and that might lead to the same thing happening to me. I want to avoid that scenario, but what can I do?”

The voice kept silent for a moment before speaking up again.

“Do you think I know, Hermes?”

The answer came without delay.

“I don’t know.”

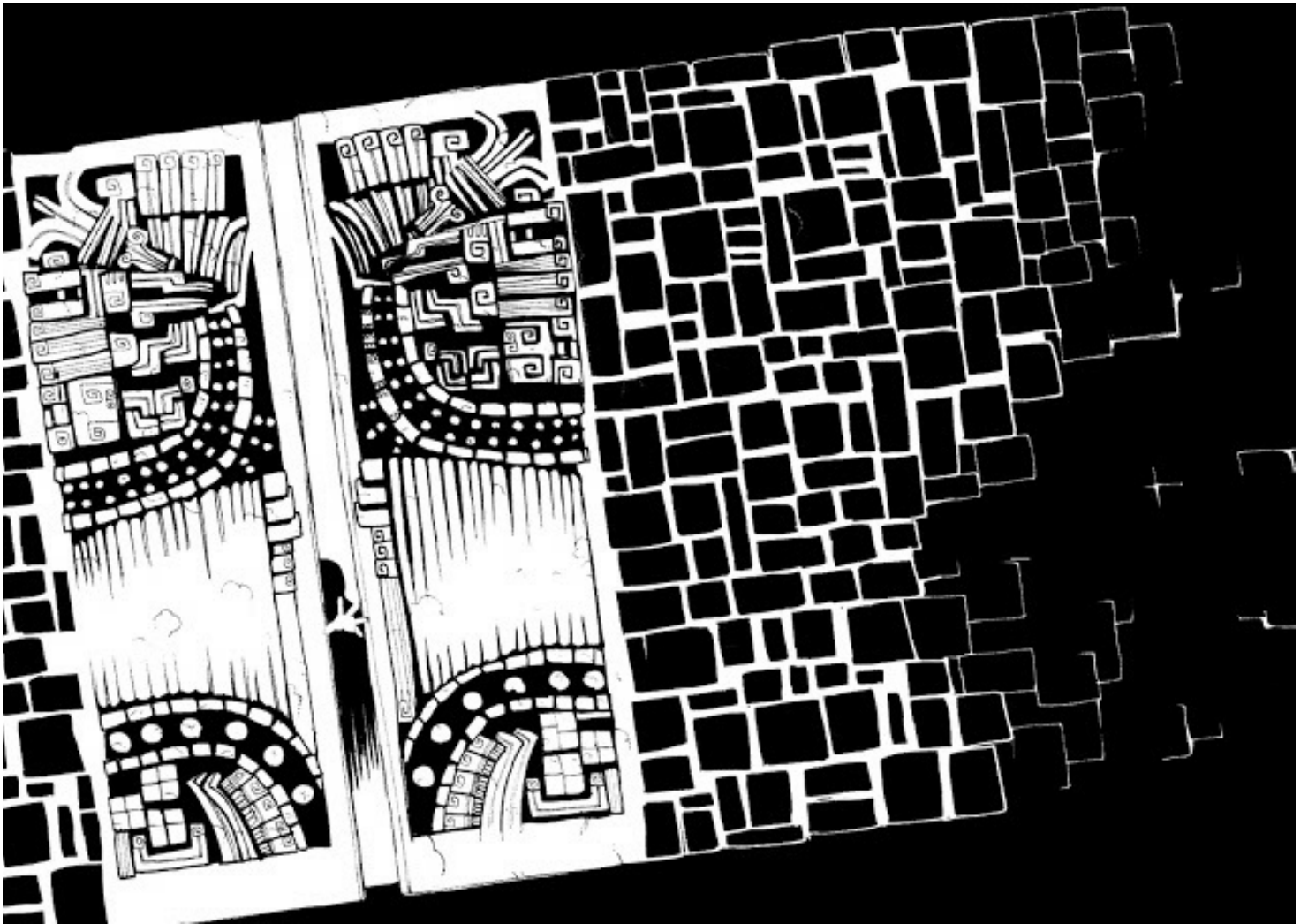
The world upwind grew clearer. The layer of white filling their vision thinned.

“It’ll clear soon, Kino,” said the first voice.

“Yeah.”

A sudden gust of wind swept the cloud away in the blink of an eye.

# Chapter 1: A Country Without Walls | -Designated Area-



A lone motorrad was crossing the plains.

The moist dirt, the sprouting grass, the sky, the clouds, and the sun were all that filled the world. There wasn't a mountain in sight. Instead a green horizon stretched on endlessly into the distance. Ninety percent of the world seemed to be taken up by the expansive sky.

The motorrad was fully laden with luggage and travel gear. Bags were secured to the luggage rack, with cans of fuel and water atop them. Small compartments hung from either side of the rear wheel, and a rolled-up sleeping

bag was fixed on top of the headlamp.

“I’m bored,” said the motorrad.

“That’s the 184th time you’ve said that,” the rider replied.

Motorrad and rider went silent in unison.

The rider was wearing a brown coat, the ends of which were securely wrapped around her thighs. On her head was a hat with ear flaps, and a pair of goggles covered her face. The rider was only in her mid-teens, with large eyes and fair features.

The motorrad continued stoically across the plains, running over patches of grass and avoiding the bumps on the way.

Eventually, the sun rose higher and higher into the air and the motorrad’s shadow grew longer.

“Can we take a break, Kino?” asked the motorrad.

Kino replied, “I think we can cover more ground today. We’ll keep going for now and stop earlier than usual so we can take it easy in the evening.”

“All right. It’s still really boring here, you know.”

“That’s the 185th time,” Kino replied. “I’ve wanted to ask you something since yesterday, Hermes. Do you ever get tired of driving?”

“Yeah,” Hermes replied, “Going at the same speed through the same landscape for hours feels like spinning my wheels on an assembly line. Or like being a hamster in a wheel.”

“I see.”

“What about you, Kino? Don’t you get bored of seeing the same stuff all the time?” Hermes asked.

“I’m long past getting bored of the scenery now. These days I just think about things.”

“Really? Like what?”

Kino responded that they were not very fun thoughts. Hermes urged her to tell anyway.

“Just now, I was wondering what I should do if someone comes at me with a knife from the right. Should I knock the knife out of his hand and use a shoulder throw to put him on the ground? Or should I twist his wrist instead? Maybe I could take a step back and kick his hand. I could avoid the knife and knee him, too.”

Hermes did not respond.

“And that was what I’ve been thinking about.”

“That’s no fun.”

“I told you so.”

The motorrad continued on its way.

“I’m bored,” Hermes mumbled.

“That’s the 186th time...” Kino trailed off, and sat up straight without warning.

“What’s wrong?” asked Hermes.

“Wow...”

“Huh?”

Many small dots emerged in the distance, clustered together in a green space below the horizon. At first glance it looked like mounds of garbage, but as they got closer it became apparent that the dots were of differing sizes.

Soon it became clear what the dots were. The larger ones were dome-shaped tents, and the smaller ones were livestock and the people standing next to them.

“No way,” said Hermes. “Humans. And oxen and horses and sheeps and houses.”

“This isn’t a country. They must be nomads...”

“I can’t believe people actually live in a place like this.”

Kino slowed Hermes. A man in unusual clothing approached on horseback.

“What do you think, Kino?” asked Hermes.

“If they don’t welcome us, we’ll have to go around them. But first we should

hear him out.”

Kino stopped Hermes. The man came even closer. He was not carrying anything. He smiled.

“Good day, Traveler. I’m from the clan you see over there. We live on these plains.”

Kino greeted the man. He asked where she was headed.

“We’re on our way to a country in the west. I promise we won’t bother your clan—we’ll be passing very quickly.”

But the man shook his head. “Please, that’s not necessary. Our clan makes a tradition of welcoming any travelers we happen to meet. I come with a message from our chief: let us offer you food to eat and roofs to sleep under. You will be treated as a guest.”

“I see,” Kino muttered, and asked Hermes for his opinion.

“If you’re okay with it, so am I.”

A moment’s thought later, Kino gave the man her answer.

“Then we’ll be imposing on your hospitality for a few days.”

The man beamed. “Excellent! I’ll go on ahead and let the others know!” he said, riding back to the clan. Kino started Hermes and slowly followed after him.

The village consisted of about 20 dome-shaped canvas tents. One of them was clearly larger than the rest.

Countless cows and sheep were grazing lazily around the village. Men on horseback herded them around.

Kino and Hermes were greeted by about two dozen people. They were a varied group in age, including young people in their twenties and middle-aged women, among others. About half had lit pipes in their mouths.

Kino stopped before the villagers and stepped off Hermes, taking off her hat and goggles.

“Good day, everyone. My name is Kino. This here is my partner Hermes.”

“Ah!” The most elderly of the villagers stepped forward. He was also holding a



smoking pipe in his mouth. “Welcome to our village, Kino and Hermes. I am the chief of our clan. It’s very unusual for nomads like us to run into a traveler. Please, do stay with us and relax awhile.”

A kindly middle-aged woman led Kino and Hermes into one of the tents. Along the way, several children peered out of their own tents to steal glances at the newcomers.

The tent was large enough to comfortably house multiple people. A wooden pillar supported it from the middle, and a radial frame held the roof in place. Soft pelts covered the floor.

The woman widened the tent opening for Hermes. She explained that the tent belonged to her family, but that they had cleared it out for the time being for their guest. Kino thanked her once again.

Once the woman was gone, Kino took off her coat. Underneath she was wearing a black jacket and a belt with several pouches. Strapped to her right thigh was a revolver-type persuader, and behind her back was a .22 caliber automatic model. The former was called Cannon, and the latter Woodsman.

Kino took off Woodsman by the holster and lay down in the tent.

“It’s comfortable here,” she muttered without a second thought.

Hermes replied, “Yeah. This tent is amazing. It’d be warm in the winter and cool in the summer, and it’s easily collapsable to boot.”

“Perfect for the nomadic lifestyle. It really might be a miracle that we happened to run into them. These people probably spend their entire lives with mother nature and the great outdoors, without any walls to fence them in,” Kino said, deeply impressed.

“Are you jealous?” Hermes joked. “They might let you join them if you ask nicely.”

Kino sat up. “I’m good, thanks. It’s not my kind of life.”

“Then what is?” Hermes asked.

Kino thought for a moment before responding. “I don’t know. I guess that’s what I’m looking for now.”

That evening, Kino was invited to dine with the clan. She left Hermes behind because he had fallen asleep. Kino was introduced to the rest of the clan in front of the largest tent, which belonged to the chief. The clan consisted of about 50 people, with about 10 or so children under the age of 12.

Afterwards, dinner was served in the chief's abode. The meal was simple and humble, the dishes mostly based on dairy products. When the clan asked Kino how she liked the meal, Kino expressed her satisfaction.

However, the air in the tent was another matter. Everyone was smoking their pipes all throughout the meal, making it difficult to breathe. When her eyes began to hurt, Kino excused herself and stepped outside.

It was just when Kino was looking out into the sunset plains that someone suddenly approached her.

"So it's you."

Kino turned, surprised. There stood a man in his thirties, his back to the glowing red sky. He had handsome features, but that made him seem emotionless.

Kino's expression changed.

The man was dressed like the rest of the clan, but unlike the others, his eyes were a light grey and his skin color was different as well. He was also much taller.

His grey eyes scrutinized the curious Kino as he said flatly, "So you're the traveler who arrived today."

"That's right," Kino replied with a nod.

"They all think you're a man. But you're not, are you?"

"...Is that a problem?" asked Kino.

"Not really."

The man stared blankly at Kino for some time before leaving, not entering a tent but disappearing somewhere else.

The next day, Kino rose at dawn. It was a clear day.

When she stepped outside, everyone was already on their feet. Women were milking the sheep, young men were grooming the horses, and children were helping to light campfires. At times adults came over to the campfires to light their pipes.

A passing woman told Kino that she was free to sleep in, but Kino replied that she made a habit of waking up early.

“That’s wonderful,” said the woman, smiling.

Kino went back inside to train with Cannon and Woodsman and maintain them before holstering them again.

After the morning chores, the clan members gathered in small groups for breakfast, which consisted of something similar to bread with melted cheese dip. Kino again expressed her great satisfaction with the food, and tried sharing some of her rations. The villagers sampled the little pieces with unimpressed looks.

After breakfast, the men went out on horseback to herd the livestock. The women stayed behind to clean up, patch up clothes or tents, or watch the children. At times they would stop what they were doing to smoke their pipes.

Kino was maintaining Hermes when she spotted several children looking in their direction from a distance.

“You can come closer if you’d like. He doesn’t bite,” she said.

“Hey, I resent that!” Hermes snapped. “Not that you’re wrong.”

The children slowly approached. The youngest of the group was still waddling on unsteady feet, while the oldest was about 11 or 12 years old. Their curious gazes would not leave Hermes. Some of the children even touched him.

“Wow! It’s hard!”

“It’s a metal horse!”

“His name is Hermes,” Kino said. The children burst into excited chatter.

“That’s a funny name!” “It’s weird!” “Hah hah hah!”

“Er-meeze?” asked one of the children.

“No, it’s ‘Hermes’,” Hermes replied. “‘Er-meeze’ sounds stupid.”

“Er-meeze!”

“It’s Hermes!”

Kino watched the laughing children and the upset Hermes, and noticed that some of the children had small pipes in their mouths. But the pipes were empty.

“What are your pipes for? Do you smoke, too?” Kino asked the boy who seemed to be the oldest of the children.

“No, I’m just carrying it around,” the boy said, showing Kino the empty pipe. “We’re not supposed to smoke until we’re adults. Adults get to smoke the grass because they work to keep us all fed. You’re only allowed to do it when everyone says you’re all grown up.”

“I see.”

“If you want to be an adult, you have to be able to ride a horse if you’re a boy. And just being able to ride isn’t good enough. You have to be able to herd livestock really well.”

“What about you?”

“I’m still practicing...” the boy trailed off. But then he took out a sickle. “B-but see? I’m the best at harvesting! No one helps my mom as well as I can,” he said proudly.

“Harvesting’s for girls,” said a girl around 12 years of age. “Boys who can’t ride horses are stupid.”

The boy said nothing. The girl turned to Kino.

“I have to bear his children someday. He’s supposed to be my husband when we grow up.”

“Oh? They’ve decided for you?” asked Kino.

“Yeah. Before we were born. So I really hope he gets cooler. I don’t wanna marry a guy like him,” the girl said, nodding her head.

“Right back at you, you tomboy!” the boy pouted. But the girl did not even

flinch.

“He’s being a brat because he’s jealous that I can ride better than him.”

Kino gave a wry smile. “Then how about this? When you get married, you can herd the livestock and he can harvest grass.”

The girl’s eyes widened. “You’re right. That sounds perfect!”

“No it doesn’t. It’s stupid.”

“Well too bad, it’s decided! I’m gonna go ask Daddy right now.”

“Hey, no!”

“La-la-la! I’m not listening!”

Kino watched the children run off. When she turned, she saw Hermes still arguing with the others.

“I said, it’s ‘Hermes’!”

The men came back in the afternoon, and after lunch everyone took a nap.

Then, the villagers asked Kino if she wanted to try riding a horse. When she replied that she had never tried before, the men taught her how.

At first she started off with slow trots, but once she was used to the feeling, Kino was able to go quickly on horseback.

The adults were impressed by her prowess with the reins. The chief watched, blowing smoke out of his pipe. “It’s decided, then.”

The other adults nodded quietly. A slight distance away, the grey-eyed man watched them all from horseback.

That evening, they had dinner in the smoky tent again.

Afterwards, Kino sat atop Hermes outside her tent and looked up at the sky. There was a cloud cover over the western horizon, making the sunset sky particularly dark.

“Did they end up getting your name right, Hermes?”

“No. They’re probably just gonna remember you as the traveler who came on Er-meeze.”



A smile came over Kino's face. "Once we leave tomorrow, you'll never be able to correct them."

"Yeah," Hermes said. "Kino, I think we're in for bad weather tomorrow."

"Really? ...That's not going to stop us from going, though. It'll be the third day."

"All right."

Kino got off Hermes.

"—So it's you."

"Whoa!" Hermes cried. The man with grey eyes had suddenly arrived out of nowhere. Kino turned, glaring.

The man took several steps towards them and stopped, looking down on Kino and Hermes. "Do you have a homeland?"

Kino met the man's gaze and shook her head.

The man spoke again. "Have you ever chosen one?"

"Not yet," Kino said slowly. "I plan to travel the world for the time being."

The man gave a few light nods. Then he spoke again in his usual monotone. "I see. So you can endure the captivity of freedom. That's incredible."

Kino silently stared.

"What's wrong?" the man asked.

"Pardon me," Kino said, "but were you a traveler once?"

"No," the man replied immediately.

"You're lying."

"I am," the man replied, his answer again immediate. Kino slowly confirmed her suspicions.

"You weren't born here, were you?"

"...Is that a problem?" the man asked, turning.

Kino's eyes followed the departing man. Once he was completely out of sight,

Hermes spoke.

“Is that the guy you said was really quick on the uptake? I wonder who he is.”

“I have no idea,” Kino admitted.

The next day. It was the morning of Kino’s third day with the nomadic clan.

Thick clouds hung low on the sky. It was dark even after sunset.

After breakfast, Kino informed the chief that she would be departing that day. He seemed surprised and asked if something about the clan displeased her.

“Not at all. I simply make it a rule to stay no longer than three days in one country. Thank you for all your hospitality.”

The chief was flabbergasted. “Actually, Kino,” he said, “we were planning to hold a feast for you tonight to welcome you. We were even going to butcher one of the cows—everyone’s been looking forward to it. Could I ask you to stay just one more day with us? The weather isn’t going to cooperate today, anyway.”

“...I’m grateful for the offer, but...”

As Kino hesitated, the woman who had given her her tent spoke up. “Chief, we can finish preparations quickly—why don’t we just have a slightly late lunch instead? Then Kino could join us.”

“Ah, that sounds wonderful!” said the chief. “What do you say, Kino?”

Kino nodded.

Delighted, the chief told those at the tent to send word out to the rest of the tribe.

“So we’re going to leave after lunch,” Kino said, loading Hermes.

“Okay. Have a good meal.”

Her preparations finished, Kino left Hermes in the tent and headed to the chief’s tent in her black jacket.

It was still dark and cloudy.

“I’m bored.”

Hermes was left all alone in the tent.

That was when the side opposite from the entrance opened without a sound and someone entered.

“Who is it? Kino’s not here.”

“I know,” said the person who entered, approaching Hermes.

“Ah, you’re the guy with grey eyes,” Hermes said, slightly tense. The man grabbed him by the handlebars and pushed forward, folding the stand.

“Let’s go.”

“Where?” Hermes asked.

“To hell.”

Long tables had been set up in the chief’s tent, with about 30 people surrounding them. As always, the tent was filled with smoke from the pipes everyone held in their mouths. In the middle of it all was the centerpiece of the meal—a massive chunk of beef cooked to perfection.

Kino was ushered into a seat near the middle. When the feast began, one of the man carved out chunks of beef to pass out to the others. The beef was salted and eaten with dried garlic.

Kino asked where the children and the rest of the adults were. The man next to her replied, “they’re eating in another tent—not enough room in this one, I’m afraid. And we have a few people out there looking after the livestock or the children. But we’ll be taking shifts, mind you. It’s been a long time since we’ve had meat. As for the children, they’re forbidden by clan rules from participating in feasts. They’re probably sulking in their tents, hoping they’ll be considered adults soon.”

The man puffed on his pipe, then poured himself something out of a leather container. He offered it to Kino, who refused when he explained that it was liquor made from sheep milk.

“This might suit your tastes better, Traveler,” said a middle-aged woman, handing Kino a wooden cup and pouring her some tea.

Kino thanked her and received the cup. Then she took a sniff. “Interesting

aroma. What is this tea called?”

“What? Er...we don’t really have a name for it,” the woman said, taken aback, but a smile soon returned to her face. “Please, have a taste.”

Kino stared into the cup for some time. And she finally placed it on the table. “I’m sorry, but it smells a little too strong for my liking. I’m afraid I’ll have to decline.”

The man next to her gave her a curious look.

Kino slowly rose from her seat. “Thank you for the wonderful meal, everyone. And thank you for inviting me here. I’ll be taking my leave now.”

All eyes fell on Kino. They were all surprised.

“Is that so? Let me walk you outside, then,” said the woman who had served her the tea.

The woman led Kino to the exit. Kino slowly turned her back on the woman. Then she quickly turned to face the woman again.

The club came swinging down, missing the back of Kino’s head and grazing her shoulder. Kino took a deft step backwards and kicked the nearest table. Plates of food scattered to the floor.

Everyone stood. They were staring at Kino with rigid faces, holding clubs in their hands. The young men blocked off the only exit. The rest of them surrounded Kino.

“What are you doing?” Kino asked. The chief approached her from behind.

“Kino. Please don’t resist and drink that tea. We have no intention of killing you. It won’t last long, I promise.”

Kino slowly turned to face the chief. “And if I refuse?”

The chief gave a wave of the hand. The people around them brandished their clubs.

Kino slowly drew Cannon from its holster. The people stepped back for a moment, but the chief took a step forward.

“Ah, so you’re willing to shoot, is that it? But you won’t be able to fire away

forever—you could kill no more than a dozen, and then you will be defenseless.”

“That’s true,” Kino replied, slowly holstering Cannon.

Several men drew near. Kino kicked the table beside her with all her strength.

The men moved to avoid the table, and in that split second Kino moved in the opposite direction from the exit. Then she grabbed the carving knife in the large chunk of beef and held it up to the nearest person—the chief. She dug her left hand into his hair and held the knife to his throat with her right.

“Nobody move!” Kino threatened. Everyone froze.

“D-damn you...” the chief growled.

“I have no intention of killing you,” said Kino. “It won’t last long, I promise.”

“Hah! Don’t bother. You’ll never leave our village! Your precious motorrad is probably in pieces by now!”

“...I’ll cross that bridge when I come to it,” Kino said mechanically. Her grip on the chief’s hair tightened. The tip of the knife touched his neck.

The chief endured, however, and raised his voice. “Don’t worry about me! Make sure she doesn’t leave this tent! Don’t let her get away!”

“Astounding.”

Kino dropped the knife and shoved the chief aside. And before the knife hit the floor, she drew Cannon again and fired three rounds.

Three gunshots punctuated the air. All three rounds hit the base of the central pillar supporting the tent. As the men lunged, Kino kicked the pillar. It broke.

The tent came down on them in the blink of an eye. Kino freed herself from the canvas and crawled outside. She did not see a soul under the dark skies, only identical tents standing on the plains in silence.

Behind her, people were squirming in the collapsed tent. Someone shouted, “Damn it! Find her! Get her and bring her back alive! Fresh blood! We need her blood!”

Kino broke into a run, heading for her own quarters. But a man rushed out of



a tent on the way and spotted her.

“You’re not getting away!”

She shot him in the leg. The man fell with a scream.

“There she is!” someone called from behind. Kino clicked her tongue and leapt behind the next tent over. That was when someone’s hands covered her mouth.

“!”

Kino quickly pointed Cannon at her captor’s jaw behind her, pulling the trigger.

The persuader did not fire. Kino froze.

“Quiet. I’m not going to hurt you,” said the man, his grip loosening.

Kino slowly looked around and found herself face-to-face with a pair of grey eyes. His right hand was holding down Cannon’s hammer, preventing it from firing. The man slowly took his hand off the persuader, however, and let Kino go.

“Don’t shoot. You’ll give away our location.”

Kino looked up at the man. “You’re not going to attack me?”

“No.”

That was when another man yelled. “There! Rauher’s got her!”

Three men came charging, brandishing clubs.

“Here. I’ll take two of them,” said the grey-eyed man called Rauher, handing Kino a club.

In the time it took for Kino to knock out one man, Rauher took down two. He pulled a knife from his belt and slit their throats in an instant. The men twitched, spraying blood everywhere, and died. The man Kino knocked out soon met the same end.

“Why are you going so far? You don’t need to kill them to let me escape.”

Rauher gave a light shake of the head. “It’s for their sake. I’m putting them

out of their misery.”

“What do you mean?”

“Come with me.”

Rauher pulled Kino into a nearby tent. “This place is mine,” he said. That was when another voice spoke up.

“You’re here, Kino.”

“Hermes?” Kino cried, raising her voice without thinking. Hermes was there, loaded just as Kino had left him.

“I persuaded him to come with me earlier. As long as we stay in here, they won’t find us anytime soon,” Rauher said, taking out his pipe to smoke.

“Thanks for before,” said Hermes. “It all turned out like you said it would.”

“Yeah. But much sooner than I expected. I’m impressed, Kino. You not only refused the tea, you even managed to escape the tent,” Rauher said, lighting his pipe with a match. The match was from Kino’s luggage. “Thanks for this, by the way,” he nodded, and savored the flavor.

“Could I ask you something?” Kino asked, replacing Cannon’s cylinder.

“Sure.”

“Why did they attack me? And why are you helping us?”

Rauher glanced at Kino. “They want to make you part of the clan. They need fresh blood to join this tiny tribe. These people’ve been doing this for centuries. Invite travelers they happen to meet on the road and observe them, and if they traveler turns out to be useful, they bring them into the fold. If not, they kill the traveler. I think everyone liked you. Make sense so far?”

“Yes. But how would they make me join? It didn’t seem like they were going to beg me or anything of the sort.”

“This,” Rauher said, holding out his pipe. “You saw how everyone was smoking, right? The grass we smoke is highly addictive. Once you’re hooked, you literally can’t live without it. Half a day without the fumes, and you get headaches. Three days later, your hands start trembling. By the fifth day you

start hallucinating. And by day ten, you lose your mind and die. The tea you refused to drink was filled with pure extract of that stuff.”

“I see. What would have happened if I drank it?”

“The tea would have knocked you out on the spot for days. The clan would have dismantled Hermes and buried the parts somewhere, and moved on to a different location.”

Kino could not respond.

“That sounds terrible,” Hermes remarked.

“They keep the grass burning around you even when you’re out, so by the time you open your eyes you’re addicted to the stuff. This grass only grows on these plains, and you can only harvest it in a tiny window of time during autumn. So you’re left with only two choices: join the clan and live like this for the rest of your life, or die of withdrawal symptoms.”

“I understand. Thank you for explaining,” Kino said, nodding again and again. “How long have you been here?”

“Five years. Got taken in like a fool.”

“What...what was it like?” Kino asked. Rauher put on a bitter smile and stuffed more grass into his pipe.

“When I opened my eyes, I had no idea what was going on. At first I cursed the villagers. My body really didn’t like the grass, so I was in bad shape for a while, too. I could have died then. I almost thought of trying,” Rauher said, lighting his pipe. His smile was broader now. “But the woman who looked after me—more like girl, back then—said something to me. ‘Don’t die. You can’t let yourself die.’ She was crying. Said ‘good things will happen as long as you stay alive.’ Heh.”

Kino was silent.

“So I decided to live with the clan. I learned how to work like the rest of them and everyone accepted me. Afterwards, I married the woman who nursed me to health. Although that part had been decided the moment the villagers first decided I should join them.”

“Were you happy?” asked Hermes.

“Yes,” Rauher replied, and added, “those were the happiest days of my life.”

“What about your wife?” asked Kino. Rauher’s response was flat.

“The villagers murdered her. Around this time last year.”

“Why?”

Rauher exhaled.

“She’s not here!” someone cried, passing by the tent.

“She became infertile,” Rauher finally said.

“What?”

“She miscarried our child, and became infertile. A woman who can’t have children is considered worthless. Not worth the precious food and grass she would be consuming. That’s the way things work in this clan. Please don’t glare at me like that, Kino.”

“I’m sorry.”

“The chief commanded her death soon after. She accepted the decision and was killed and buried. I don’t even know where she is anymore.”

“What about you?” Hermes asked. Rauher took another puff.

“She told me the same thing she said the first time we met.”

Kino and Hermes could not say anything.

“That’s how it was,” Rauher said with one final puff, tossing the ashes and putting the pipe away. Then he muttered, “It’s about time.”

“What do you mean?” asked Kino.

Rauher did not respond. Instead, he slinked over to the tent entrance.

A man stuck his head inside. “Aha! I knew it!”

At that moment, blood spurted from his neck.

Rauher kicked the fresh corpse out the entrance. “Let’s go. Don’t worry, it’s going to be all right,” he said, holding the entrance open. Kino slowly pushed

Hermes outside.

The village adults were surrounding the tent. When they saw Kino and Rauher come outside, there was a small commotion. The sky was even darker than before.

“Wonder if it’s gonna rain,” Hermes wondered to himself.

The chief shot Rauher a piercing glare. “What is the meaning of this?”

“I just did what I wanted, Chief,” Rauher answered.

“Hand over the traveler. We’ll think about what to do with you later.”

Rauher took out his pipe and slowly stuffed it with grass.

Then he spoke.

“There’s no need for thinking anymore. Your time is up.”

“Silence!” the chief cried, anxious. He turned to several men holding long rods. “Attack all at once! Make sure to get both, I don’t care if you hurt them!”

Without a word, Rauher struck a match. And he slowly lit his pipe.

BANG.

A deep explosion shook the air. The villagers turned in unison, and the first to notice the disaster screamed.

“F-fire! The tent with the grass is on fire!”

“What?!”

Smoke was pouring like water from the roof of one of the tents. Rauher sucked on his pipe.

“What did I tell you? Go on and put that fire out, or it’s going to burn up.”

The people paled. Having forgotten all about Kino and Rauher, they rushed to the burning tent.

The smoke was growing worse and worse. Flames began to flash from inside as well.

“The grass! The grass!”



“The grass of life!”

“Douse that fire! Do whatever it takes!”

Rauher, Kino, and Hermes watched the panicked crowd from a distance.

Though the clan tried their best, patting down the flames with clubs and clothes had little effect. The fire spread at a frightening speed.

“That’s our supply of grass, the whole thing from last year’s harvest. I got Hermes’ permission earlier to borrow some fuel and gunpowder to mess with it. Without the grass, the villagers will only have ten days to live,” said Rauher. Kino looked at him. “Me included,” he admitted, slowly puffing smoke.

The fire grew stronger and stronger, casting on the ground the shadows of the people gathered around the tent.

One man bravely approached the fire to salvage the grass. His clothes and hair caught fire, and the flames began to lick away at his entire body.

The man let out an inhuman scream as he danced, becoming a ball of flames. No one tried to help him. Soon he crumpled in a pile of ash. Several others were quickly consumed by the fire.

People desperately patting down the flames fell one by one, pale with oxygen deprivation.

The tent collapsed. The fire consumed the entire supply of grass and the smoke grew even thicker. It looked like a white signal flame.

Kino watched the smoke and the people falling in heaps of despair. Those who stuck their heads into the smoke for what could be their last taste of the fumes soon began frothing at the mouth and staggering away before screaming and falling.

Before long, the tent and the supply of grass was exhausted. The burnt-out tent was surrounded by people who had stopped moving.

Even those who could still move were completely dead inside.

Out of nowhere, one man broke the neck of the woman next to him. Then he began to beat those curled up around him to death. The sound of skulls breaking echoed across the plains. Even more people stopped moving. Some

set themselves on fire and burned to death.

One man shambled towards Kino and Rauher. His hands were burnt to charcoal.

“Heh heh heh heh...” he chuckled blankly and closed his eyes. Rauher’s knife slit his throat in an instant.

Rauher went to the burnt-out tent and put those in agony to rest. Those crumpled on their knees, those drowning in tears, those clinging in tight embraces, those foaming at the mouth, those beating others to death, and those turned halfway to ash.

Rauher mechanically cut their throats, one after another. The living quickly turned into the dead.

“What...what is the meaning of...”

The last of the villagers—the man who had until recently been the clan’s chief—stammered.

“If you hadn’t done what you did last year, maybe I would have acted differently.”

With a red knife in hand, the grey-eyed man stared.

The chief tore at his hair and muttered to himself, “It’s over...it’s all over...”

Rauher shook his head.

“No, not entirely. Goodbye, Father.”

Rauher left the knife in the chief’s neck and slowly turned. Kino and Hermes were watching. He returned to their side.

“Hell has come and gone. You can go now,” he said.

“Let’s go together. You can gather up whatever grass the people here have in their pockets and belongings and go to a nearby country. They might be able to cure your addiction somehow. Wouldn’t you be better off seeking out a faint hope instead of waiting here to die?”

Rauher looked at Kino. “You have a point,” he conceded. “But I’m staying.”

“Why? There’s no one left.”

Rauher smiled. “You’re forgetting something.”

“What?”

“The children.”

“Oh.”

“It’s not over yet.”

Kino was silent.

“The kids need to know what the adults did, what it was they were smoking, and why I did what I did. And I need to teach them how to survive on their own, and stay with them until I die of insanity. No—they *need* to see me lose my mind and die. After that, they’ll be able to survive looking after their livestock. Create a new future, and a new clan that doesn’t need the grass to survive. That’s why I’m staying.”

“I understand,” Kino said with a nod. “Then tell me about your homeland. If I ever happen to visit—”

Rauher shook his head. “No need. In fact, I don’t recommend it. I’m a wanted man back there.”

Kino could not reply. But Hermes spoke. “What did you do there? Might as well tell us, since this is goodbye.”

Rauher gave a wry grin. “Sure, since this is goodbye. ...I used to be a soldier. Trained from childhood to carry out special missions. I assassinated many enemies during the war, all for the country and its people. But when the war ended, I became unnecessary. A country that emerged victorious and just in the war couldn’t possibly admit to having resorted to assassination. I was branded a mad killer who murdered people on a whim and kicked out of my homeland. I never wanted to be a traveler. I wanted to live and die in the country I was born into. I wanted to raise a family there and live a normal life. I thought maybe I could do that here, with this clan.”

“I see. Thank you,” said Hermes.

“You’re welcome.”

Kino quietly put on her coat, hat, and goggles. The moment she made to start

Hermes, Rauher suddenly spoke.

“You remind me of her.”

“What?”

“You asked me earlier why I saved you, right? That’s my answer. Because you remind me of her. Not the way you look, I mean. It’s your gaze. You have the very same gaze she did.”

A smile slowly spread to Rauher’s grey eyes.

“You mean...your wife?”

Rauher nodded. “Yeah. I still dream about her sometimes.”

“...If I had become part of this clan, would I have been made your wife?”

“Yes.”

Kino said nothing.

“Goodbye. It was nice meeting you,” Rauher said, turning away.

Kino watched him depart.

“Thank you for helping me. I’ll never forget your kindness. Goodbye...”

Without turning, Rauher waved.

The motorrad’s engine roared throughout the village. The roar soon grew distant, however, and disappeared altogether.

The children were trembling together in one tent. Soon the entrance opened and a man with grey eyes entered. The man slowly explained that he had something to tell everyone. That what he had to say was very important, and that the children needed to pay close attention.

The children slowly gathered around him. The man looked around at them and opened his mouth, when the sickle in his neck stole away his voice.

“I saw it all! It was you! You did this!” someone said. The man tried desperately to speak, his mouth agape, but soon expired.

The children stepped out of the tent. They cried. They cried and cried and cried themselves to exhaustion until someone spoke. They had to live on

without the adults, said the child. Everyone nodded. They had to do all the work the adults used to do. Everyone nodded.

The children rummaged through the chief's tent to find anything that might be useful. Someone found something strange packed into a large bag. Everyone looked inside.

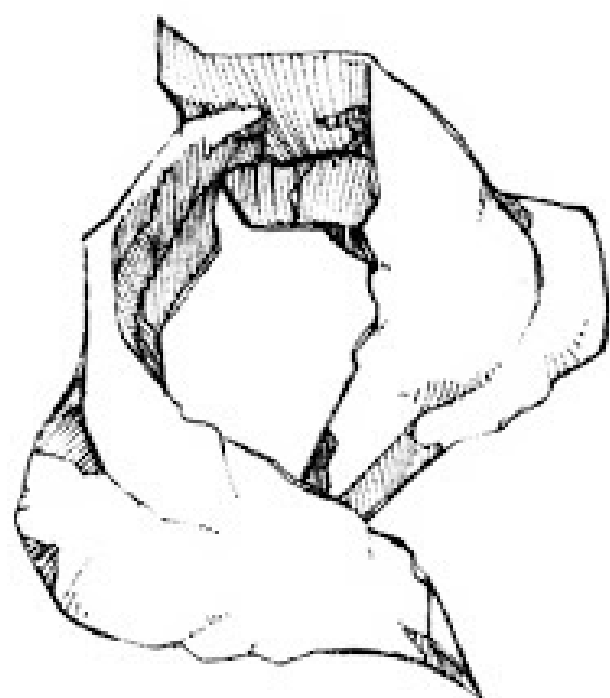
It was grass. A secret supply no one but the chief knew about. It was not an insignificant amount.

Someone soon realized what it was, and someone else said that someone should try smoking it. One child said that the grass was only for adults, but someone else thought otherwise.

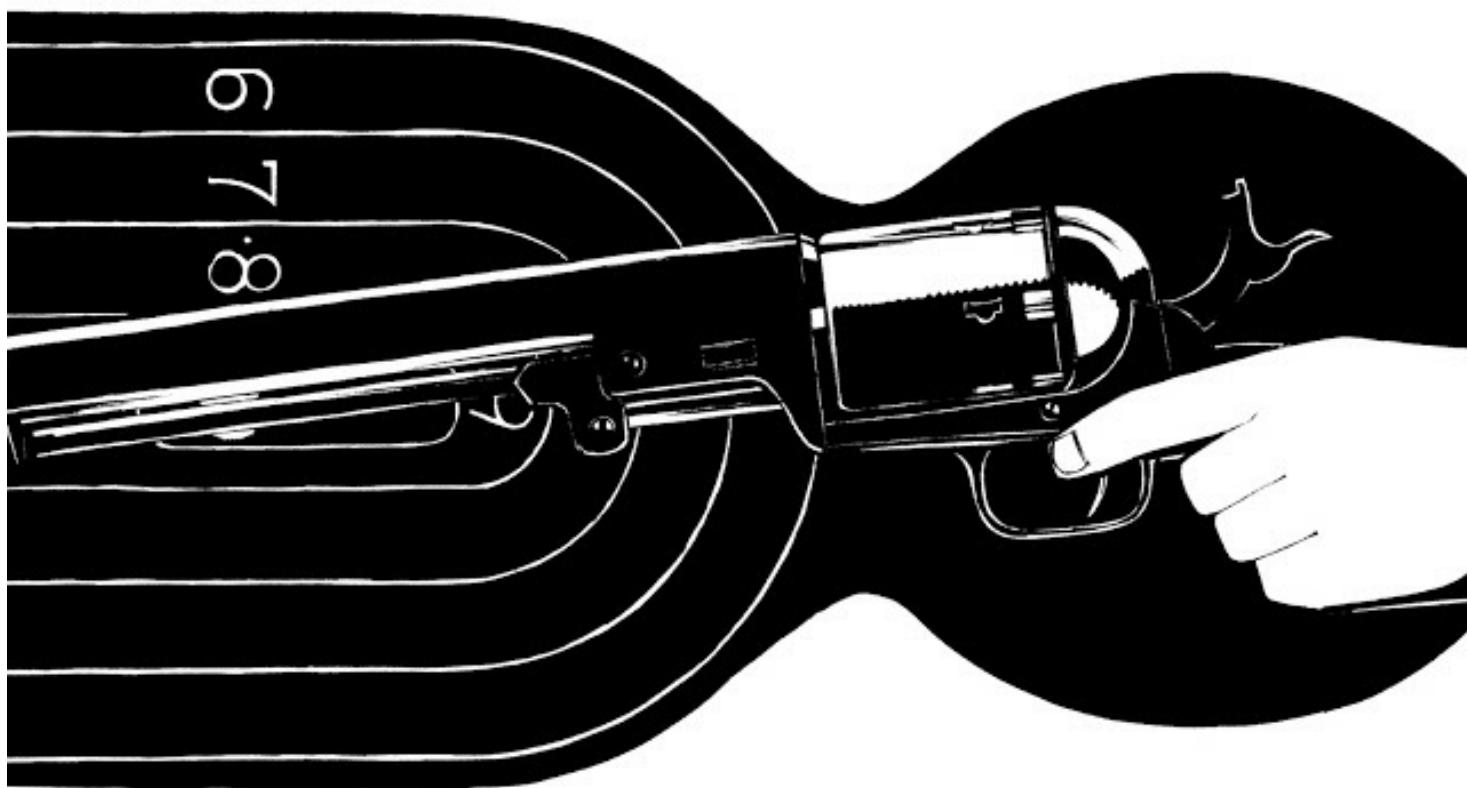
"We're the adults now. So we get to smoke it."

Everyone agreed. The children brought pipes to their mouths and began to suck on the smoke. At first, some of them were nauseated by the strong flavor, but they had to endure that much if they wanted to become adults.

Two weeks later...



## Chapter 2: Persuasiveness | -Persuader-



It was a deep forest thick with layers upon layers of grass and trees. Faint beams of afternoon sunlight shone into the wood. Birds were chirping quietly.

A doe and her fawn stood side-by-side feeding on the grass. Slowly, they savored their meal.

Suddenly, the doe raised her head. Her fawn was still busy with the grass. The bush shook and trembled, and a human popped out.

The doe froze on the spot. The human, equally taken aback, instinctively held up a persuader.

The human was still young—around 15 years of age, or perhaps less. The

human was in muddied blue pants and a somewhat thick green jacket, a hat with ear flaps, and—for some reason—a pair of goggles. The eyes behind the goggles were stiff, as though trembling in fear.

The human watched the deer scramble away and exhaled. A moment's rest later, the human broke into a run. The persuader in her hand was a slide-action shotgun with a tube-shaped magazine under the barrel.

Soon, the human slid behind a thick tree trunk. Then she took aim at the direction she had come from. Her large eyes widening, she stilled her breath and scanned her surroundings.

The bushes shook softly. The human reflexively opened fire. Leaves flew into the air in time with the gunshot. There was no one behind the bush.

The human clicked her tongue and leapt out from cover. With her left hand she operated the grip under the barrel. A slug casing flew into the air, and another slug was loaded.

Ducking, without even looking back, the human turned and ran with all she had. Without realizing what was happening, she repeated the same set of actions again and again.

Without warning, a smile came over her partly-obscured face.

“Calm down, Kino. Never lose your composure. Fear and panic can come after you're safe,” she said to herself.

The human called Kino smiled and fixed her grip on her persuader. She took out a slug from a pouch at her waist and loaded the magazine.

Then, Kino took aim with the persuader securely in both hands and closed her eyes—almost as though she were meditating under the tree.

Many seconds passed in silence.

Rustle.

Something stepped on the grass. It was not far.

Rustle. Again. Louder this time.

Rustle. Again. Closer this time.



Rustle. Again. Kino slowly opened her eyes.

Rustle. Kino pointed her persuader almost at once. And she opened fire.

The slug penetrated several blades of grass. A bush off to the left shook. Kino loaded the next slug and took aim. But the moment her finger was on the trigger, she spotted in the shade of a tree to her right a pair of hands—and the persuader in them, aimed directly at her. Kino rushed to adjust her aim, but a second before she found her mark, her opponent pulled the trigger.

The shot landed square on Kino's forehead and bounced off. It hit a branch and bounced back up again before landing on the ground a distance away.

"How was that, Kino?"

The shooter emerged from behind a tree. An old woman with a serene smile. She had a slender build and beautiful silver hair tied into a neat ponytail. The old woman wore a form-fitting shirt and pants, with a light green cardigan. And just like Kino, she wore a pair of goggles and held a large-caliber revolver-type persuader in her hand.

"Painful. More for my pride than my head," Kino replied, looking up with a hand rubbing her forehead.

The old woman pulled off Kino's goggles and hat. The shot had left a small, bleeding graze where it landed. The old woman took out a small roll of bandages and a tiny bottle of disinfectant from Kino's jacket and performed first aid, sticking the soaked bandages on Kino's head.

"You have to take good care of your looks, especially since you're still young," said the old woman, smiling gently.

"Welcome back," said a motorrad parked by a narrow road in the woods as Kino and the old woman made their way out of the bushes.

"Thank you for waiting, Hermes," the old woman said. The motorrad called Hermes then spoke to the downcast Kino. "Where?"

Without a word, Kino pointed at her forehead, which was covered by her hat.

"I suppose you still have a long way to go," said the old woman. "Now let's go on back and prepare dinner." She put her revolver inside the handbag she had

loaded on Hermes.

Kino handed her persuader to the old woman before climbing on Hermes and starting the engine. The forest was filled with rumbling.

The wold woman sat sideways on the cushioned back seat. Kino slowly started Hermes.

“Don’t be so down, Kino,” Hermes said along the way. But Kino still said nothing. The old woman sat behind her, as calm as ever.

Some time later, Kino stopped Hermes without warning. Hermes muttered, “I’d say about three.”

They were still on the forest path, but the woods ended on one side a little further ahead, giving way to fields. Further in the distance was a small house.

“Is the gunfluid merchant due today?” Kino asked, turning.

The old woman shook her head. “No, he’s not scheduled to be here. ...Kino, get off Hermes.”

“What?”

“When I give the signal, you will immobilize them. But leave one so he can speak.”

The old woman handed Kino the persuader she used earlier.

“I...I don’t know if I can.”

“If anything should go wrong, I will be there to help. Practice makes perfect.”

“But...”

Kino was hesitant. But the old woman smiled.

“Don’t you want to become strong, Kino?”

“Yes...”

Kino received the persuader and deftly disappeared into the forest.

The old woman moved up to the rider’s seat. The moment she grabbed the handlebars, Hermes whispered, “Er, please don’t let me tip over.”

The old woman nodded. And she put her hands over the levers.

“Not to worry, Hermes. I have the controls memorized. This is the brake and this is the clutch, correct?”

“Other way around.”

The little log cabin stood on the boundary between the forest and the field.

And at the entrance stood three men who were clearly thieves. A fat one, a skinny one, and a scarred one. The men each held long revolver-type persuaders. Their horses were tied to the entrance.

When the men spotted the motorrad sputtering along and the old woman riding it, they burst out laughing.

The old woman somehow managed to stop Hermes before the cabin. Hermes had to remind her, “No, use that foot to lower the—”

“This? Oh, the protruding bit here, I see. I think I finally have this down, Hermes.”

“That’s right. Oh, but we’re on soft ground now so you have to use the center stand—”

“There.”

The old woman managed to lower the side stand. She picked up her handbag and climbed off Hermes. The side stand slowly began sliding into the ground, and in a moment’s notice Hermes was on his side with a loud noise.

“This is cruel and unusual punishment,” Hermes groaned.

One of the thieves said loudly, “You live here, old bag?”

The old woman nodded, greeting the men. “What an unusual group of guests you are. Let me get you some tea.”

The thieves snorted. “Forget the tea. Bring out all your valuables. Shut up and do what we say, and we’ll let you live. If not...”

“If not?”

“If not, you’re going to hit the ground before you can blink.”

“You’re threatening me, is that it?” the old woman asked, as if in confirmation.

“Are you senile? Of course we are!”

The old woman then held out her handbag. “I can hear you, Kino. Do it.”

Kino leapt out of the woods and opened fire. The rubber slugs struck the fat man in the head, knocking him to the ground with a groan. Then Kino lunged into the tall man’s chest and struck him in the groin with her persuader, then swiveled around to shoot him in the jaw and finished him off with an uppercut. Then she used the fallen man as a shield as she shot the scarred man’s hands.

“Wha...?” The scarred man gasped, dropping his weapon and cradling his aching hands. His friends were out cold on the ground. Kino’s aim remained trained on him.

The old woman finally spoke again. “Pardon me...”

“Ah!” the man shouted.

“No need to be scared, sir. We have no intention of killing you. But in exchange...”

“Y-yes?”

“Hand over all your valuables.”

“What?”

“You must have some, if you’ve robbed other houses before coming here. Now hand over all your valuables. If not...”

“If not...?”

The old woman smiled. “Do I really need to finish that sentence?”

The man shook his head again and again.

“This is evil,” Hermes mumbled, still lying on the ground.

“Half a day’s walk from here, you’ll find a river. It’s shallow enough that you can cross on horseback. You are not to look back until you have reached that river,” the old woman finally said. The thieves went pale and disappeared.

Curious, Kino watched them depart.

The old woman came up to her, carrying a breadbasket full of jewels and

bracelets. "Excellent work, Kino. Now let's start making dinner."

Kino nodded.

As master and apprentice turned and headed inside, Hermes called out from behind them. "Someone prop me back up, please?"

That evening, Kino came out into the backyard with an axe in hand. Hermes stood next to the window.

A short distance away was a mound of firewood and tree stumps cut diagonally.

"Hermes," Kino said, picking out firewood.

"Hm?"

"Why do you think those people decided to become thieves when they're so weak?"

Hermes could not answer.

"It's kind of weird to say this, but wouldn't you get worried for them, doing work that's so far beyond them?"

Hermes looked at Kino, who still seemed genuinely confused. "It wasn't like they were weak, Kino..."

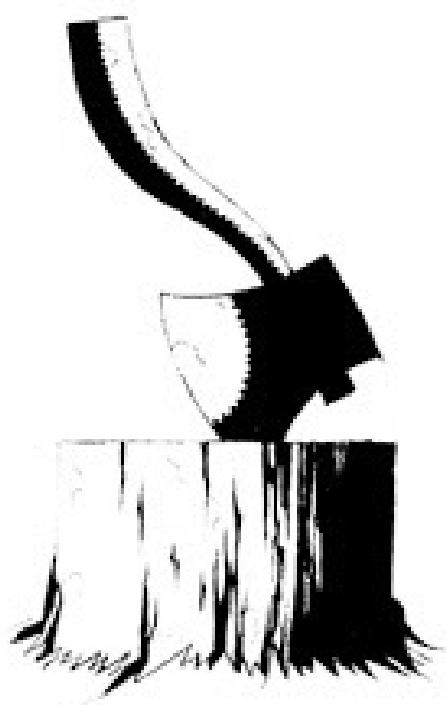
"Hm?" Kino turned. There was a small bruise on her forehead.

"No, never mind. You should get back to chopping firewood."

"Right."

Kino went back to where Hermes stood, then threw her hand axe at the firewood.

The axe spun twice in the air and struck the firewood, chopping it clean in half.



# Chapter 3: The Country of Identical Faces | -HACCP-



It looked as if many low tables had been set up in the hinterlands.

The brown dirt hills rose and plateaued at the top. The valleys between them had been cut out by rainwater over the eons, eroded so far that the bases of the valleys, too, were flattened. Not a single speck of grass was to be seen.

The sky was a towering blue. Feathery clouds floated by in the distance.

A single path cut through the landscape, drawing a thin white line that snaked up the hills and straightened out on the plateaus, then snaked back down and straightened out again.

A lone motorrad was traveling down this road, leaving a wake of dust behind.

The motorrad was fully laden with travel gear, with compartments on either side of the rear wheel and large bags and a sleeping bag tied on top. A metal mug hanging next to the luggage clattered up and down.

The rider was wearing a brown coat with the edges wrapped around her thighs. On her head was a hat with ear flaps, and a pair of goggles. A bandanna was wrapped around her face to keep the dirt out.

The motorrad climbed up a hill and raced across one of nature's tables. The road soon sloped down into another descent, but at that point the rider stopped the motorrad. The rear wheel skidded to a stop, and the cloud of dust enveloped them both before settling down.

"Do you see that, Hermes?" the rider asked, pulling down her bandanna. She was still young, likely in her mid-teens.

The motorrad called Hermes responded. "Yeah, I see it. It's really something."

"Yeah." The rider nodded.

They were looking down at a gaping valley that dwarfed any other around it. The hill on the other side was only faintly visible. And at the base of the great valley was a country.

The country's towering walls formed a circle in the valley, with large buildings and streets laid out inside. A vibrant green forest enveloped the city center. Blue ponds dotted the forest.

The brown lands and the green wood struck a stark contrast, with the wall as the boundary.

"Where do you think that water's from, Kino?" asked Hermes.

The rider called Kino replied, "Probably an underground source. The rivers that cut these valleys must still be running underground."

"I see. Let's hurry on then. I can't wait to see the amazing country they built in this amazing place," Hermes urged.

"Same here," Kino replied, pulling her bandanna back up.



The motorrad quickly descended the slope.

Someone was watching Kino and Hermes from a distance through a pair of high-magnification binoculars. He was in a pit in the ground and covered in a dirt-colored tarp.

“This isn’t good. Someone’s gone into the country.”

“Must be a traveler,” said the person next to him, “one who doesn’t know its terrible secret.”

The first person replied, his voice stiff. “Yeah. Who would go into that country if they knew what it was like in there?” Then he added, “Sergeant, contact headquarters. We have an emergency.”

The country had only one entrance. Kino had to go all the way around its perimeter before she finally reached the gates.

There was a small security station before the entrance, manned by a man and a woman who acted as guards and immigration officers.

Kino requested a three-day entry permit for tourism purposes. The officers gave her one condition.

“Anyone wishing to enter our country must submit to a blood test conducted to prevent infection from outside pathogens. The test may take some time. Will you proceed?”

When Kino asked how the blood test worked, the officer explained that her blood would be drawn with a syringe.

Kino fell into thought. Hermes asked, “What’s wrong, Kino? Don’t tell me you’re scared of needles.”

Kino quickly replied that she was not. Then she was led inside by the officers for her test.

Soon, Kino emerged again—looking clearly more fatigued than before.

“I can never get used to this...” she muttered to herself.

The sun slowly but surely continued its journey across the sky.

“I’m terribly sorry, but it may take a little while longer,” the male official said

as Kino zoned out from atop Hermes.

It was only when the sun was casting an orange light from the horizon that one of the officers rushed outside.

“The results are here, Traveler! And I’m happy to say that you have permission to enter. We’re terribly sorry to keep you waiting.”

Kino smacked Hermes awake. They set off through the gates together, with the saluting officers behind them.

The walls were casting shadows inside, draping hints of darkness in the forest that greeted Kino and Hermes. Beyond the gates was a large vehicle and several people ready to greet them. A middle-aged man, a middle-aged woman, and two young women.

“Welcome, Traveler. We apologize for having kept you waiting all this time. Since it’s so late, we will take you to your hotel,” said the man.

Kino was about to thank him when she looked at his face and froze.

He was the same man she had seen at the security station.

“Wait, no...he’s someone else,” Kino mumbled. This man was at least 50 years of age, while the man outside was much younger. They were not the same person.

The middle-aged woman had the very same face as the female immigration officer, but also a little older. But the remaining two women looked absolutely identical to the officer, save for their clothes. They looked identical to each other as well.

The middle-aged woman smiled and explained that she and her husband ran the hotel, and that the two younger women were their daughters.

“Th-thank you...” Kino managed to say. The family loaded Kino and Hermes onto their vehicle and set off.

“We’re terribly sorry that you had to wait so long. Our entry procedures are much stricter than those of other countries. But I do hope you’ll enjoy yourself while you’re with us,” the middle-aged woman said on their way to the hotel. She spoke to Kino several times again during the trip, but the stunned Kino

could only manage half-hearted answers.

When they arrived at the hotel, Kino and Hermes were led into the lobby. The hotel was magnificent and clean, but there were no other guests in sight. A young man in uniform manned the front desk. He had the same face as the immigration officer, the only difference being his tone of speech and his hairstyle.

Two young men in bellboy uniforms unloaded Kino's luggage from Hermes and delivered it to her room. Both had the same faces as the immigration officer and the man at the front desk.

One of the bellboys led the silent Kino and Hermes into their large suite. When Kino asked him about the cost of lodgings, he replied, "Lodgings are provided free of charge to all outside visitors. Please enjoy your stay, and feel free to use the call bell whenever you desire."

The bellboy bowed and left the room.

Even after the door closed behind him, Kino remained lost in thought.

"Hermes."

"Hm?"

Kino only spoke once she was sure no one was in the room.

"Do you think the people we met today were all related to the hotel owners? The officers, the man at the desk, and the bellboys? They all look so similar. The women, I thought at first might be triplets. But..."

"Maybe. But aren't there too many of them?"

"But..."

"I think everyone in this country has the same face," Hermes said matter-of-factly. "You probably didn't see, but there were quite a few people out on the streets. The men all had the same faces, and the women had the same faces."

Kino's hand stopped in the middle of pulling off her coat.

"Why?" she wondered.

Hermes thought for a moment before replying, "Who knows?" in his usual

tone. “Maybe they’re all from the same factory. That would explain everything.”

Kino gave Hermes a disbelieving look as she folded her coat.

“What?”

“I’m tired, Hermes. I’ll get some sleep now and ask about it tomorrow so I don’t end up accidentally offending anyone.”

“Yeah.”

Kino took off her belt and her black jacket. At the same time, she unwrapped her hand persuader holster.

After a shower, Kino lay on her clean sheets and fell right asleep.

The next morning, Kino rose at dawn. The weather was beautiful.

After doing persuader drills and maintenance, she did some light exercises.

Kino looked outside the window once the sun was fully out. She was greeted by orderly streets and verdant green trees.

Breakfast was served in her room. The bellboy, the man at the front desk, and even the chef who prepared her meal before her eyes all still had the same face.

After breakfast, Kino woke up Hermes and went down to the lobby without her coat.

About 20 people were gathered outside the building, staring at Kino and Hermes from beyond the glass doors. They varied in age, but the men and the women each had the same faces.

“You’re not surprised,” Hermes said to Kino.

Kino shook her head. “I’m kind of used to it now.”

“This way, please,” said the hotel owner, bringing in a man in his late thirties. He also had the same face as the other men.

“Good morning, Kino, Hermes,” he said. “I’m from city hall. I’m here to offer services as a tour guide of sorts today, if you would like. I can answer any questions you might have about our country.”

“Thank you. I’d appreciate it. Could I ask one thing to start with, then?”

“Yes? What might it be? ...Of course, I have the feeling that I already know what you will be asking,” the guide replied with a smile. “‘Why do the people here have identical faces,’ correct?”

Kino nodded. The guide nodded as well.

“I will explain everything on the way. Please, right this way.”

As countless identical faces watched, Kino and Hermes entered the guide’s vehicle.

Their ride took them to a large, square building with white walls and no windows.

Once inside, Kino and Hermes were led into a splendid parlor. Kino propped up Hermes and took a seat next to him.

“Let me welcome you once again to our country. And let me finally answer your question,” the guide said. He paused, then continued. “We are all clones.”

“What are ‘clones’?” asked Kino.

“‘Clones’ are defined as organisms that possess entirely identical genetic information.”

“And what is ‘genetic information’?”

“It is a sort of blueprint that exists in every organism. These blueprints are tiny, tiny things we cannot see with the naked eye, but the little differences in them creates the amazing diversity you see between creatures. Even creatures of the same species have differing appearances, as you can see with humans. Facial features, skin color, hair color, and eye color, for instance. The differences in these blueprints creates differences between individuals. Does this make sense so far?”

“Oh. Yes,” Kino replied, a little overwhelmed.

“Organisms with entirely identical genetic information are known as clones. Take trees, for instance. If you were to cut off a branch and plant it in the ground, it will take root. This second tree was originally from the first tree, so it has the same genetic information as its source. This is also a sort of clone. Do

you understand?”

Kino nodded. “Yes. You’re talking about grafting, correct?”

The guide continued. “That is precisely how we have been created. We have one male and female blueprint respectively, from which everyone is cloned—or copied, if you will. Now you know why we all have the same faces.”

“I see. It makes the most sense,” said Hermes.

Kino cast Hermes a glance and turned back to the guide. “So...er...how?”

“You want to know how clones are made.”

“Yes.”

“Originally, the conception of a child requires a mature male human and a mature female human, with the child carried in the woman’s womb before being birthed. However, this requires the mixing of the genetic information of the man and the woman. Sons will not be identical to their fathers, nor daughters to their mothers. That is why we use a different method.”

“So...in other words,” said Kino, “There’s no need for the birds and the bees?”

The guide smiled. “No. And no need for storks, either.”

Kino’s eyes widened. She lightly bit her lip. “Er...could you please explain in more detail so I can understand?” she asked, leaning forward.

“Of course,” said the guide. “That’s precisely the reason we brought you here today. This very building houses our cloning facility. But I should give you a brief overview of our history before I give you the tour.”

A long, long time ago, a man and a woman arrived in this desolate, deserted land.

They were the originals of this country’s people.

They were researching biology and medicine in a land far from their place of birth. But their research—research on human cloning—was not accepted by other people. Soon they were ordered to halt their work altogether.

The man and the woman decided then to leave their country. They loaded all the equipment they had developed onto a large truck and left on a journey to

find a land where they would not be disturbed.

Eventually, the pair discovered an underground water vein. Once they no longer needed to worry about water supplies, they were able to plant trees and raise plants and livestock.

At the same time, they created clones of themselves to test the results of their research. They raised the clones as if they were their own children.

Over time, they began to produce more and more food, and the number of individuals—the population—increased. A country was born. Hundreds of years since, their clones continued to live stable lives in that very place.

“Let’s be off, then.”

Kino and Hermes followed the guide into the hallway.

In the hall, they passed by several people dressed in white, all naturally with the same faces. The group passed through several heavily-guarded checkpoints before finally reaching a door.

“Here we are. Welcome to the Cabbage Patch,” the guide said with a hint of theatricality before opening the door.

Before them was a long hallway. The wall on one side was made entirely of glass.

Kino pushed Hermes forward and slowly entered.

Beyond the glass wall was a slightly wider space that stretched on parallel to the hall. Large black test tubes stood like pillars at regular intervals down the path.

“These test tubes are our wombs. Have a look at Unit 14,” the guide said, turning on a switch.

The dark tint on the glass slowly disappeared. Something came into view inside the tube, which was filled with water.

Soon the object in the tube became visible. It was small, with hands and feet and a large head that pointed down. A long tube ran from the figure’s navel to the top of the test tube.

“An unborn baby...” Kino mumbled.

“Wow,” Hermes exclaimed.

“Correct. This is an unborn child, at the equivalent of 35 weeks since conception. This one just won’t sit still. Let me turn off the light again.”

The test tube went dark once more.

“This is how all our children are incubated. Once they have matured enough, they are brought out of the test tube—birthed, in a sense—and then are raised like children in any other land. You asked me earlier about the specifics. Let me answer your question.”

Kino looked back at the guide.

“There are several ways we can accomplish this, but this is the process we currently use. We need two ingredients. The first is genetic information, the male version for men and the female version for women. This information can be obtained from any part of the body. Now normally, the information only gives us enough for the particular part it was taken from. So for example, material we take from the hand could only give us a hand. This is what allows each part of the human body to be what it is, but that makes things a little difficult for us. So we make some modifications so that information from any part of the body can be used to create an entire being. The other ingredient we need is an unfertilized egg cell, which is extracted from a woman and kept in cold storage. Do you follow?”

“Sort of.”

“Same.”

The guide continued. “After that, we do some highly intricate work with the egg cell and replace the entire genetic information that was originally inside it with the information taken from the subject. At that point, the cell is considered fertilized, with the entire genetic information in place. This egg cell is then placed in an artificial womb and incubated for 265 days. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I think I follow.”

“See, Kino?” said Hermes. “I knew this was a factory.”



The guide laughed. “Hah hah! Hermes is entirely correct! Unlike the days of domestic production, we do things factory-style, with perfect quality control. This is why miscarriages, stillbirths, and infertility are unheard of. Most of our citizens don’t even know that these words exist.”

“Doesn’t anyone want normal...er, traditional childbirth?” asked Kino. “This might sound like a foolish question, but wouldn’t it be possible to place the egg cell with all the information into a real womb, not an artificial one?”

The guide was a little taken aback. “Foolish? Not at all, Kino. That is one way of doing things, and is certainly possible with our technology. That is the process we use with our livestock. After all, it would be much less time and effort if we were to forgo the artificial womb. However, no one chooses to do so. There are no records of anyone having chosen such a path. After all, it’s nine months of being unable to work, and a great deal of trouble to boot. And there is the risk of miscarriage or stillbirth, as I mentioned earlier. Think about it this way—why would you go to the trouble of chopping firewood to boil water when you can do the same thing more easily with electricity?”

“I see...” “That makes sense,” Kino and Hermes nodded.

“Oh, but that does not mean that the birds and the bees—so to speak—are also nonexistent here. In our country, it is simply considered recreation for two, like a sport. Sort of like tennis. Why not try it out while you’re here?”

A moment passed in silence before the guide excused himself.

“...Ah, pardon me.”

A married couple came in. Naturally, the man had the same face as the guide, and the woman the same face as the rest of the women in the country—although she was a little more plump than the others. The woman seemed surprised to see the guide.

“Oh my! It’s unusual to see you here. Is city hall closed for the day? Or are you skipping work?”

“Please, I’m on duty right now. It’s been a long time since I had the chance to play guide. Let me introduce our newest visitors—Kino and Hermes.”

“Hello.” “Hi there.”

“Ah, you must be the travelers who arrived yesterday. Welcome!” the woman said, waving at Kino and Hermes. “We’re here to see our daughter today. You simply have to meet her too. Over here, in Unit 25!”

Everyone stood before Unit 25.

There was nothing inside.

But the woman took out a pair of binoculars and looked into the test tube. She smiled and handed it to Kino.

Kino also looked inside through the binoculars. She could make out something tiny in the center of the test tube.

“Can you see her?”

“Oh...yes.”

“Isn’t she just the most darling thing?”

“...Yes.”

The woman was ecstatic. “She’s at six weeks now. And adorable, just like her mother!”

Kino did not know what to say. The guide quickly stepped in. “P-pardon us, now. We’ll be heading off to the education center.”

Kino and the others left the Cabbage Patch and walked down another hall.

“What is the education center for?” Kino asked.

“As the name states, is it a place where we educate those who have met certain requirements. Let me explain,” the guide said. “In our country, you are permitted to apply for parenthood starting at the age of 16. But before you can become a parent, you must pass an examination. Marital status is not taken into account. The important thing is that the prospective parent has the capacity to properly raise a child. Many factors are considered, such as the applicant’s physical and mental health, economic status, job and education level, childcare experience, and support network—their family, for instance. First comes the application stage, then an interview, a written examination, a practicum, and a final examination, all taking place over the course of 10 days in an enclosed facility. Applicants are put through rigorous simulations where

things spiral out of their control and they are pushed to their limits, all to see if they do not resort to violence against the weak. Those who do not pass with a score of 93 or higher are not permitted to have children.”

“That’s really strict,” Hermes remarked.

“I agree. I have overseen such examinations many times and can say with certainty that it is a rigorous test. However...”

“Yes?” asked Kino.

The guide turned his eyes forward and replied, resolute. “Those who cannot pass such thorough testing do not have the right to become parents. A parent must be ever-gentle yet realistic, and able to shower a child with unconditional love. These are prerequisites for parenthood. Having a child is not like raising a pet turtle or iguana. It means bringing a human being into the world and shaping the future of this human. What could be a heavier responsibility for a person to bear?” the guide said, fists clenched. “Has a parent who treated childrearing as a game ever raised a physically and psychologically healthy child? What about a parent who treated their child as a trophy to parade around and show off? Used their child like a slave bound to serve a master? Forced a child to inherit a family legacy at the cost of their potential and future career? Or used their child as an outlet for stress or a punching bag when drunk? If such a case ever comes to light, our city hall immediately moves to separate the parent from the child. There is nothing more important to the survival of our country than putting potential parents through rigorous testing. In that sense, this facility produces parents as well as children.”

“I see... You know, a country I once visited had a saying that goes, ‘I’d like to see the faces of the parents who raised you’. It was their way of saying, ‘Who taught you to behave?’,” said Kino.

“A marvelous saying. I’ll keep it in mind. ...On that note, in our country, the punishment for the killing of one’s own child is always execution, regardless of reason or motive. However, the killing of a parent by the child is not considered a crime. A child’s upbringing is the responsibility of the parent. And if your own child were to hurt you or kill you, you have no right to complain. It is your own fault for raising him or her in that way, and is something you must accept.”

Kino and Hermes were silent. The group soon stopped at the end of the hall, where several chairs were placed.

“Apologies. It seems I walked you past the door,” said the guide.

“Once a prospective parent has passed the examination process and is deemed to be ready, he or she must go through parenting classes. If this is the parent’s first child, the classes last 250 days, or about the time it takes for their child to be incubated.”

Kino, Hermes, and the guide went through a door into another hallway. Again, one of the walls was made of glass, allowing a clear view into the classroom space beyond.

“Look.”

Inside the classroom, about a dozen people were learning to bathe a baby using dolls. The next room over was hosting an in-class lesson with notes and textbooks, and the room after that was a cooking class for baby food. The gender ratio was about even, with all participants clearly determined to do well.

“This is how we master the skills and knowledge it takes to raise a child. Even this process has a final exam—you are not allowed to take your child home or even hold them until you have passed, so everyone is intent on passing. In fact, no one ever fails.”

“I see,” Kino said, looking down at the classroom.

“And finally, the day arrives. Childbirth day, when the parent gets to hold their child for the very first time. It really is a moving experience, holding that little life that shares your entire genetic information. Everyone knows already that all men and all women here have identical genetic information, of course, but it is still very emotional. And for married people like myself, I also treasure my daughters, who are identical copies of my beloved wife,” the guide said, smiling. “Unfortunately, there are no births scheduled for today or tomorrow. It’s a shame you won’t be able to see the moment with your own eyes.”

After the tour, the group returned to the parlor.

The guide told them that he had something very serious to say. “To be truthful, our country has one critical weakness.”

“Really?” asked Kino.

“Yes. Illness. That is why we conducted such thorough tests on your blood when you first entered our country, Kino. To prevent our country from being infected by an unidentified or incurable pathogen from the outside world. Even if the illness in question might be commonplace in the country you hail from, it could be fatal to the two people—in a manner of speaking—that inhabit ours. Do you understand?”

Kino slowly thought over the implications. “Since everyone is technically the same two people, if one person becomes sick, the rest of the population may fall ill as well, correct? One illness could potentially destroy the entire country...” she mused.

“Just like how motorrads from the same line on the same factory end up getting broken in the same places,” Hermes remarked.

The guide nodded, satisfied. “That’s correct.”

“Then has something like that ever happened?” Kino asked. The guide shook his head.

“Not yet. Before they began to create clones, our ancestors undertook thorough research to check that they were not susceptible to any illnesses native to this area. We have never left this land, and will continue to live here. We are safe so long as we take care to properly examine the occasional traveler who happens to pass by. Our methods have worked well so far, and we have had no such difficulties. Not yet, in any case.”

Kino was quietly in thought.

The guide spoke, his tone more cheerful. “Indeed, the world can never be a perfectly safe place. But...”

“But?”

The guide smiled.

“So long as we have the will to survive, we will not be destroyed so easily.”

“And that is all for the tour. How did you like it?”

“It was great. I’m happy with it,” said Hermes.

“I’m glad to hear that. And you, Kino?”

Kino gave several small nods. “We’ve been to a lot of countries so far, but yours was the most surprising yet. I’m very glad I came.”

The guide breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank you. It makes me happy as a guide to hear that from you.” He paused. “By the way, Kino. I’m about to go home for lunch now. Would you like to join our family? If you’d like to try the local home cooking, I guarantee you we can offer you a meal that beats any restaurant. I realize I’m abusing my powers and letting private life spill into business, but what do you say?”

Kino pushed Hermes down the ramp and off the vehicle. Immediately, four girls with identical faces and clothing, and three boys with identical faces and clothing surrounded Kino.

The children had been waiting at home for their father to return.

“Thank you for coming to get me, children. This here is Kino, a traveler. And this motorrad is Kino’s partner Hermes,” said the guide.

“Hi everyone.”

“Hello!”

The guide led his chirping children into the house, where they were greeted by his wife, a woman in an apron and the same face as every other woman in the country.

Kino was ushered into the large yard, with its immaculately-trimmed grass and trees. There was a large table in the yard set with food ready to be eaten.

The guide explained that he would introduce the children, and told them to stand when he called their names. The children stood all in a row.

“Let me start from the right. This here is our oldest, Hen. She’s 12 years old. Then we have our second daughter Duo, who is 11. Next is Tria, the oldest of the boys. He’s 10 years old.”

The girls gave curtseys and the boy a bow with his hand over his chest.

“Fourth and fifth, we have two girls. Tetra and Freja. They were born on the same day and are both nine years old this year.”

A pair of girls who looked completely indistinguishable from one another curtsayed to Kino.

“Then we have the sixth, Hex. He’s eight years old. And finally, our youngest—Hepta, seven years old. My dearest family—ah, can’t forget the wife, now.”

“I’m so glad you remembered me this time, darling,” his wife joked, chuckling.

The meal was excellent. The guide explained that there was no shortage of food in the country because even meats and vegetables could be cloned.

After dessert, the children played in the yard. The guide’s wife asked him if he didn’t have to go back to city hall for work. The guide replied lazily, lying on the grass. “My job now is to accompany the traveler. I’m sure it’ll be fine, as long as no one finds me out.”

“Honey, you’re abusing your powers and letting private life spill into business,” his wife sighed. She exchanged glances with Kino and gave a wry smile.

Hermes was surrounded by the children, practically a toy to them.

Kino watched the children for a time before speaking to the guide. “Pardon me if I’m wrong, but the girl on the far left is Hen, yes? Next to her is Tria, then Hepta and Hex. Tetra’s the one touching Hermes’ headlamp, and Freja is the one behind her. And the girl sipping tea in her chair is Duo. Am I correct?”

The guide sat up, looking at his children. “Yes. Yes, you are. How did you know?” he asked, flabbergasted.

“At first I couldn’t tell them apart, but that hurt my pride a little. So I observed them carefully over lunch. It was surprising how subtly different they were. Their habits, their movements. And their faces were slightly different too, like their personalities.”

The guide was lost for words. “...In that short span of time, you... I’m amazed at your observational skill, Kino. Truly.”

A hint of embarrassment rose to Kino’s face. The guide continued. “Which ones did you find most difficult to identify?”

“Tria and Hepta. They’re both around the same height, and look and behave

similarly. They're both very reserved, no?"

"That's right. They can't stand up to their big sisters. Just like me with my wife, actually. Hex is the only one of the men here who has a headstrong streak. Which ones could you tell apart most easily?"

Kino turned her gaze to the sisters in front of Hermes. "Tetra and Freja, surprisingly. They look even more identical than the others, but I could tell that Freja was always following after Tetra."

"Yes," the guide said, and his eyes fell. "To tell you the truth, Freja was not originally meant to be ours."

Kino turned.

"Regulations forbid us from applying to have more than one child at a time. There must be at least a year between children. Freja, however... The young woman who was supposed to be her mother passed away in an accident two days before the delivery date. So an exception was made, and our family, whose Tetra was due on the same day, brought Freja home as well. She gets her name from the woman who would have been her mother."

"I see..."

"It's not a problem for us, as she has the same genetic information as my wife and our other daughters. And the whole family knows about Freja's situation. But..."

"Yes?"

"But each time I say Freja's name, I feel for the young woman who lost her life and the chance to hold her child. Freja must become happy, if only for her sake. And I am always trying to think of ways to put a smile on her face."

Kino and the guide watched the children for some time. Suddenly, Freja approached and begged her father to take the entire day off for once to play. The guide looked at his daughter, torn.

Kino slowly rose.

"I think we've imposed for long enough. Hermes and I will have a look around the city ourselves. Thank you so much for all your help. If we happen to run into



your superiors, we'll claim that you showed us around all day."

The guide turned, surprised. Kino smiled.

"Try not to get caught."

The next day. It was the third day of Kino's stay in the country.

The weather was just as beautiful. According to the locals, the climate remained consistent throughout the year.

Kino stocked up on fuel for Hermes, and food and water for herself, and finished preparations to leave before noon.

The guide and his entire family came to the hotel to see Kino off. He thanked her for her help the previous day.

He had his wife drive their children home first, and turned back to Kino and Hermes. There was a serious look on his face.

"I have one very important thing to tell you before you leave, Kino. Please, listen carefully."

The guide, the hotel owners, and people who had time on their hands were gathered just before the gates to see Kino off. The men and the women each looked identical.

The guide spoke on behalf of his countrymen.

"Kino. Hermes. Thank you so much for visiting our country. If you ever happen to be in the area again, don't hesitate to visit. Our children will welcome you with open arms."

"Thank you." "Thanks. Take care."

The guide watched Kino and Hermes leave through the gates and breathed a long sigh.

"I suppose that's all for playing guide. I wish we'd get more travelers here."

The hotel owner gave him a look of disbelief. "Please get back to city hall and do your work. You must have paperwork piled all the way up to the ceiling."

The owner's wife chimed in. "That's right. You took an entire half-day off yesterday, didn't you? There's so much to do now, so stop slacking off and get

back to work!”

Scolded by the older woman, the guide could do little but helplessly submit.  
“Right.”

“That was fun. It really was.”

“Yeah.”

Kino and Hermes were riding away from the country’s ramparts.

“I think I’d be willing to visit that country again someday.”

“Not every day I hear you say that, Kino.”

The motorrad continued, leaving a cloud of dust in his wake.

Someone was watching Kino and Hermes from a distance through a pair of binoculars. He was in a pit in the ground and covered in a dirt-colored tarp.

“Yes!” he cheered. “The traveler is safe.”

“A real stroke of luck if I ever saw one.” said the person next to him. “Maybe he didn’t find out about the terrible secret they’re hiding.”

The first person replied, his voice excited. “That doesn’t matter. Our mission is to prevent any further loss of life.” Then he added, “Sergeant, contact headquarters. We are taking the traveler into our protection.”

The motorrad raced down the wide valley housing the country and finally climbed up a hill.

On top of the plateau stood three people. Kino quickly braked and stopped Hermes.

The three people were men, all wearing dirt-colored clothes with paint on their faces. They blended so well with the ground that if they had been lying on the ground, Kino might have ended up running them over.

The three men all had different faces. One of them opened his empty hands to show Kino and slowly approached her.

“Excuse me, Traveler,” he said, “but this route is temporarily off-limits.”

“Why?” Kino asked.

The man took another step forward and saluted. “I’m a soldier from a country far to the south. This area is dangerous—we are about to undertake a military operation here. Please remove yourself from harm’s way until the hostilities are finished.”

“If I refuse, you’ll take me away by force, correct?”

The soldier nodded. “That’s right. We have been ordered to guarantee your safety at any cost.”

“I understand. I don’t wish to be in harm’s way, either. I will follow your instructions.”

One of the soldiers pulled up a large canvas from the ground to reveal a hole, inside which was a small buggy.

On the slope of the hill on the other side of the valley from the country was a large tent, placed just high enough that the country was readily visible over the crest. Several soldiers were keeping their eyes on the country through their binoculars.

Kino and Hermes were led there with all courtesy.

“We’ve brought the traveler!”

“Excellent work.”

The soldier departed with a salute. A middle-aged man in uniform introduced himself to Kino.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Traveler. And your motorrad as well. I am the commander of this unit. Our country’s reputation would have been sullied if anything had happened to a bystander like you because of our operation. But rest assured, you will be perfectly safe so long as you remain here in our forward headquarters. I ask for your patience while we go about our business.”

“I understand. What is this operation about?” Kino asked. But at that moment, someone outside the tent gave a command over the radio.

“The traveler has been secured. Ready the cannons!”

“Cannons?” Hermes repeated.

The commander replied, “Yes, cannons. We will soon be opening fire on the country in the valley. Look over there.”

The commander pointed to several mounds of dirt under the slope. Soldiers began to pull canvases off the mounds, revealing the cannons.

The muzzles of the cannons were slowly raised. Soon, each and every one was pointed at the country in the valley.

Signals were exchanged, and things became busier in the tent.

“Cannons ready!”

“Scouts ready!”

“Medics ready!”

“Once we open fire, you are free to observe from atop the hill. Let us begin,” the commander said to Kino. Then he turned to his subordinate. “Open fire!”

A terrible rumbling shook the base of the valley. White smoke rose from every cannon, and soldiers in the tent began climbing up to the crest of the hill. Kino followed them on Hermes.

A cloud of black spread over the country in the distance. Then there was a series of explosions. The smoke almost looked like flowers in bloom. The sound of the blasts did not reach the hill until much later.

There was another round of cannon fire behind them, and yet another volley of flowers in the air. The scene repeated itself again and again.

At some point, the commander—who had been watching it all from next to Kino—began to explain.

“We just fired shots that explode in midair and spray tiny pieces of shrapnel onto the ground. They are a very effective weapon for taking care of people who are outdoors or in fragile buildings.”

Kino was silent.

The black flowers eventually stopped blooming. The land inside the country’s walls were then shaken by explosions.

“The rounds in this volley are filled with powerful explosives. They destroy

sturdier buildings along with the people inside.”

It was very loud on the hill, with the sound of cannon fire and the delayed booming of the impacts.

“You wouldn’t stop now even if I asked you to, correct?”

“Indeed. If we were to cease fire at this point, they may return fire,” the commander said, and paused for a moment. “Ah, you must have left something behind there,” he said. “I assure you, we will reimburse you for anything you may have lost. Again, we humbly apologize for dragging you into this operation.”

Kino shook her head. “Not at all. It’s nothing important.”

The commander gave Kino a concerned look. “My men spotted you entering the country two days ago. We had been planning to open fire yesterday afternoon, but we held off because we could not get an innocent bystander involved.”

“I see. Thank you. ...I have a question. Why are you attacking that country?”

“Naturally, to exterminate the country of devils with identical faces.”

“Then—” A deafening boom swallowed the rest of Kino’s words. She tried again. “Then someone from your country must have gone inside and seen them.”

“That’s correct. I was told that some of my countrymen happened to visit this country on their travels. That was when they saw the fiendish things. The people with their identical faces, the glass jars where they incubate humans... The travelers barely made it out alive to tell of the horrors they faced. But unfortunately...”

“Yes?”

“One of the 10 committed suicide. The rest were also heavily traumatized, with two committed to hospital for physical and mental treatment. The poor things.”

“So that’s why you decided to destroy the country,” said Hermes. Smoke was rising from the country in the valley. The explosions continued.

“That’s correct. We must make certain that no one else falls victim to such terrible fates. We were truly worried when we saw you step through those gates. We feared the worst might happen. But it is a relief to see that you made it out safely.”

Kino and Hermes said nothing. Suddenly, the cannon fire stopped. The last of the rounds exploded far in the distance, and the sound carried all the way to the crest of the hill. Then silence fell over the land. Black smoke wafting from the battered walls began drifting in their direction.

“Is it over?” asked Kino. The cannon fire was, replied the commander.

“What do you mean? Is there more?”

“Yes. Take a look over there,” the commander said, pointing behind the rows of cannons. There was a large cylindrical pillar, about the size of a factory smokestack, being pulled along behind a truck. It was pointed at the end with tiny wings on the other end.

“A missile?” Hermes guessed.

The commander nodded. “We are about to fire that missile on what remains of that country. If even one of them remains, they will continue to spawn endlessly. Our country gave the matter great consideration, and decided to develop a special weapon in order to annihilate them entirely.”

“What kind of weapon?” Kino asked.

The commander replied that Kino would see shortly. He added, “I advise you to put on your goggles and cover your nose and mouth.”

The missile was slowly raised. The commander gave the launch order.

With a roar, the missile lifted off in a trail of fire and smoke.

It drew an arc of smoke in the air and broke into two. The back part fell to the ground. The front continued along the arc and fell towards the country in the valley.

The second before it made impact, the front of the missile split open and a white liquid was sprayed from it. Like a net, the substance covered the country in a dome. A moment later, the dome turned into a massive ball of fire. The

flames swallowed everything.

Several seconds passed before the sound and the shockwave reached Kino and the others. The dust storm kicked up in the blast clouded their vision.

Time passed, and when their vision had cleared, nothing remained where an entire country had been only minutes earlier. Even the ramparts had been destroyed, leaving behind nothing but scattered bricks. Everything else was flattened utterly. A mushroom cloud, just like one from a volcanic eruption, was spreading over the ruins.

“We did it!”

The soldiers in the tent cheered, hugging one another.

“That was incredible. Was that the new weapon you developed?” asked Hermes.

“That’s right. It seems the operation was a success,” the commander said with a sigh of relief.

Kino pulled her bandanna from her face and asked about the workings of the missile.

“You saw the white substance at the end, correct? That was fuel. The fuel covered the entire country before impact, and the bomb set it all alight. Then the reaction swallowed all the oxygen in the area, incinerating the vicinity in the blink of an eye. The pressure from the reaction flattened everything on the ground. The heat also burned the lungs of any living creature there. You won’t find a single live insect in that hole now. We have succeeded.” The commander gave a good-natured laugh and dusted off his hat. “Finally, our work is at an end.” Lovingly, he pulled out a photograph from his pocket. He smiled.

“What’s that?” asked Kino.

“Here. My daughters,” the commander said, handing her the picture.

The photo depicted two little girls with identical faces, both about 10 years old.

Kino showed the photo to Hermes without a word. Then she turned to the commander. “Twins?”

“Yes. Their names are Irini and Mille.”

“I...can’t tell them apart.”

The commander laughed. “You’d be able to, if you were to meet them in person. Irini is headstrong, and Mille is very withdrawn.”

“I see...” Kino replied, handing back the photo. The commander once again laid his eyes on his daughters.

“It’s been half a year since we set out on this mission, and just as long since I’ve seen their faces. Once I bring the troops safely back home, I’ll be able to see my little girls again. I’m sure they’ve grown so much while I was away...”

Kino said quietly, “I wish you a swift return so that you will be able to meet them soon. I’m sure your daughters are looking forward to seeing their father again.”

“Thank you, Traveler. ...It’s now safe for you to be on your way. Thank you very much for your cooperation. If you ever happen to be in the south, do pay our country a visit. I can introduce you to my daughters as well.”

Kino smiled. “Of course. If you’ll excuse us, then.”

With the soldiers’ salutes at their backs, Kino and Hermes left the headquarters and rode for a long time along the hills.

Kino stopped Hermes where they could see the ruins of the country in the valley.

“Goodbye, everyone. Thank you for everything.”

“Bye.”

The motorrad resumed its journey, heading down the hill.

They soon disappeared beyond the smiling, waving soldiers and their rows of cannons.

For the next several days, the soldiers dismantled the cannons, which they no longer needed, and buried the parts deep in the ground. After checking that they had left no waste behind, they loaded themselves onto trucks and returned home.



What was only a few days earlier a country was now nothing more than a bombed-out ruin and piles of ash.

Fifty days passed. The ruins were beginning to turn into the color of the dirt being blown in by the winds.

Fifty more days passed.

Something popped out of the surface of the ruins, displacing dust and rubble.

It was a rectangular concrete box, about the size of a house. The door on the rectangle opened.

From within emerged a group of people. All the men had the same faces, as did the women. They looked up at the sky with smiles on their faces.

The man who had guided Kino also stepped out with his wife and children.

“Careful not to trip on anything,” the man said. His children chirped excitedly.

“Wow! It’s been so long since I saw the sun!” “Look, it’s all broken.” “Wow... it’s all flat.”

Holding her father’s hand, Freja asked, “Are we gonna be able to play on the grass again?”

“Of course, darling. The forest will be back before you know it, too.”

Freja smiled and joined her siblings, who were walking further ahead.

“Well, well. It’s all been blown to smithereens. Looks like city hall will be busy for a while.”

The guide put on a wry smile. “It sure will be. And that means less vacation time for me.”

Someone gave a chortle of laughter. “Do your best, Mr. President. Your citizens are counting on you. And we’re grateful to you for all your efforts.”

The president-cum-tour guide shrugged. “I swear, you people are the most difficult superiors to work with.”

“Hah hah hah!” the citizen laughed, disappearing into the crowd.

People spilled into the ruins through the exit. All the men had the same faces,

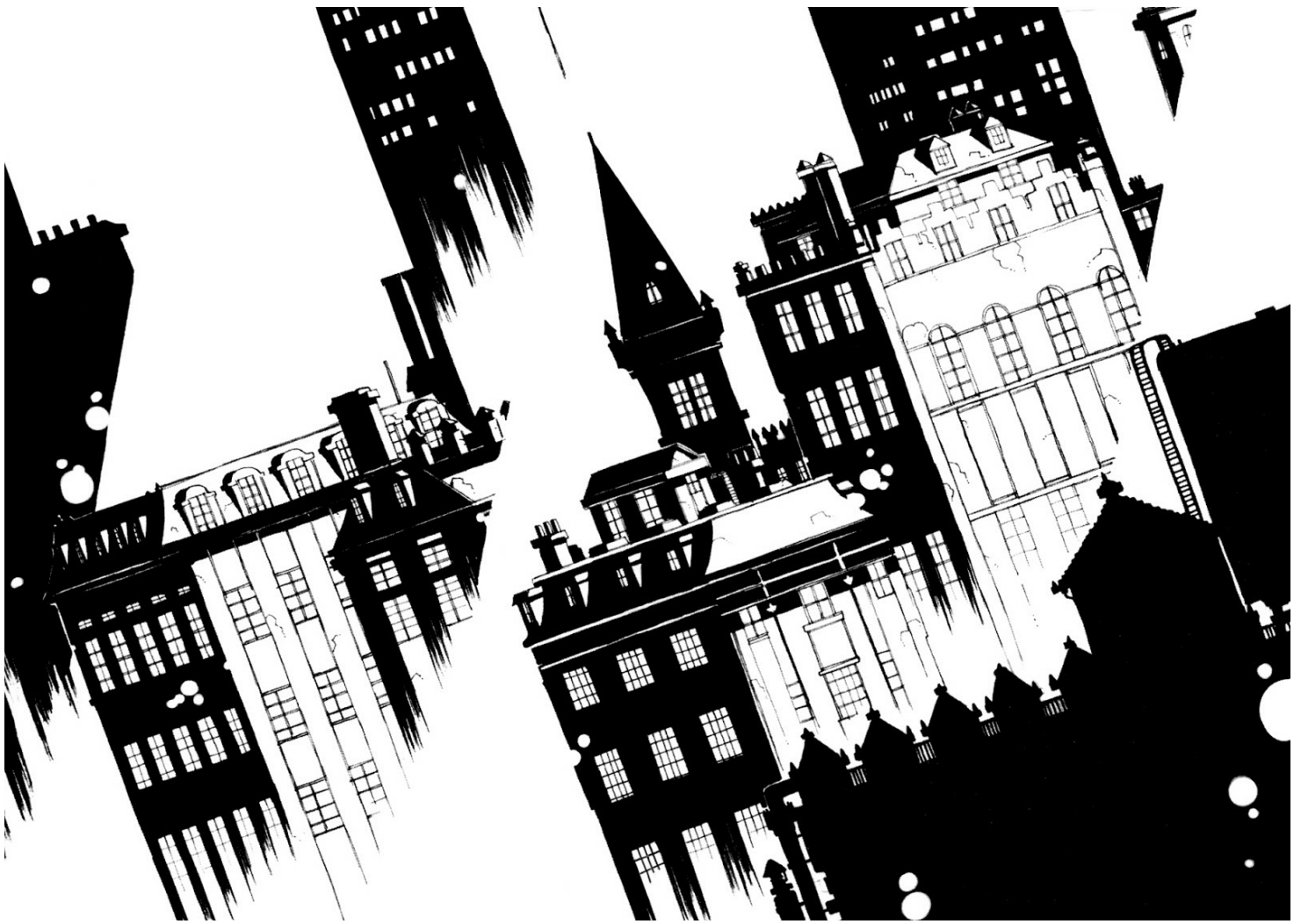
as did the women.

The president-cum-tour guide slowly turned and put on a smile.

“So long as we have the will to survive, we will not be destroyed so easily.”



# Chapter 4: The Story of a Mechanical Doll | -One way Mission-



“Goodness! I didn’t expect to run into someone here.”

The forest was dyed in bright autumn colors. The old woman who had poked her head out of the woods was slender in build with an apron over her clothes and a basket in hand.

She was looking at a young person in her mid-teens who had short black hair and large eyes with fair features, wearing a black jacket and a thick belt. A hand persuader holster housing a large-caliber revolver was wrapped around her right thigh, and an automatic persuader was secured behind her back.

Next to her was a motorrad laden with travel gear.

“Hello,” said the young person.

“Good day. You must be a traveler,” the old woman said with a smile.

“My name is Kino. This here is my partner Hermes,” said the traveler named Kino.

The motorrad called Hermes greeted the old woman before asking, “Do you live in this area, lady?”

“I do. And what of yourselves?”

“About that,” Kino said. “We were told there was a country in this area, but can’t seem to find it. You’re not from there, ma’am?”

The old woman shook her head. “A country, you say? I’m afraid you won’t find one around here. You must have made a wrong turn somewhere on your way. I live in an isolated house here in the forest.”

Kino sighed. Hermes said, “I guess that makes sense. The road was almost totally closed down. Just give up, Kino.”

The old woman then spoke, her tone rising. “Are you planning to camp out tonight, Kino? It will be dark soon. If you’d like, why not come to the house I serve?”

“You’re a servant?”

“Yes, a live-in maid at the master’s house. I’m only out at the moment to get ingredients for dinner. What do you say? It’s not very far.”

Kino asked Hermes for his opinion. Hermes advised that they should do what they always did in such situations.

“All right. Thank you very much.”

The old woman smiled. “Wonderful! I’ve never had guests over at the house before.”

Kino and Hermes followed the old woman into the woods and came out into a clearing. The clearing was home to vegetable patches, a long, narrow barn, and free-range chickens.

Across from the vegetable patch was a house.

Kino grimaced at the sight of the building. It was three stories tall and made of sturdy brick. It was narrower than it was long, with one side completely devoid of windows. Its utilitarian construction struck a sharp contrast with the scenery around it, like the building had been lifted straight from an urban inner-city district.

“Is that the house?” Kino asked, confused.

“It is. Isn’t it lovely?” the old woman replied.

Soon, they reached the front door. The old woman stopped. “Ah, there’s something I need to tell you before we go inside,” she said. “I am a mechanical doll.” She slowly placed her right hand over her chest and smiled.

“A mechanical doll?” Kino repeated in shock.

“Yes. I have a human appearance, but I’m made of wood and metal and all sorts of other strange components. A mechanical doll is made by human hands to serve human needs. My role is to perform housework for the humans who live in this house.”

“...Er...”

Kino did not know what to say. The old woman continued.

“I’ve begun falling apart here and there now because of my age, but I still have more than a few years left in me.”

“Wow, sounds like you’re a really well-made model. Who created you?” asked Hermes.

The old woman shook her head. “That, I do not know. All I know is how to clean, do the laundry, cook, and read bedtime stories to the young master until he falls asleep.”

Hermes said nothing.

“I see,” Kino said.

“Now, let me ask the master for permission to have you over tonight. I’m sure he won’t refuse. One moment, please.”

Kino waited for the old woman to go inside. “No way.”

“Yeah. ...What do you want to do?”

“Looks like all we can do is ask the ‘master’ about her,” Kino mumbled. At that moment, the door opened to reveal a man about 30 years of age in an expensive button-down shirt, and a woman around his age who was likely his wife. Hiding shyly behind them was a boy who seemed to be about five.

The old woman stood before them at the door.

“Master, let me introduce you to the travelers. Kino and Hermes. Kino, Hermes, this is my master and his family.”

“Hello,” said Kino. The ‘master’ slowly smiled.

“Hello, Traveler. Motorrad. The maid told us about you. You became lost on your way, correct? We have plenty of spare rooms to offer. Please, make yourselves at home.”

The old woman was overjoyed. “Lovely! I shall prepare a room for Kino and Hermes as quickly as I can. Master, will the room down the hall be all right?”

“It’s up to you. And make sure to prepare an extra serving for dinner,” said the man.

“Right this way,” the old woman said, ushering Kino and Hermes into the large living room.

The man was on the sofa, reading the paper. His wife was playing with their son, with toys Kino had never seen before. The old woman excused herself and left.

“Er, may I ask you something?” Kino said, looking at the man.

“Yes, what is it?”

“About your housekeeper...” Kino hesitated. “She claims to be a mechanical doll. Is she, really?”

The man gave a light nod. “Yes. She’s a wonderful help around the house. Thanks to her, my wife and I can both go to work and spend more time together with our son.”

“I see... Could I ask another question?”

“What is it?”

“Aren’t there any countries in this area?”

The question seemed to trouble the man. But he soon gave Kino an answer.

“Indeed, there aren’t any countries in the vicinity. You must have lost your way in the forest. The woods are deep and confusing.”



Kino asked, "Then why is your family living here?"

The man said nothing for some time.

Then he smiled.

"Indeed, there aren't any countries in the vicinity. You must have lost your way in the forest. The woods are deep and confusing."

"Right..."

After that, Kino said nothing. She simply waited for the old woman in silence next to Hermes.

The sound of footsteps eventually reached the living room, and the old woman arrived.

"I've finished preparing your room. Right this way."

"Thank you. If you'll excuse us."

"Of course. Do make yourself comfortable."

Kino gave the family a slight bow of the head and pushed Hermes out of the living room.

The man finished reading the paper.

He went back to the first page and started again.

Kino and Hermes followed the old woman to a large room down the first floor hall. The room was furnished with an ornate bed and antique furniture. The room had been wiped clean and spotless.

"Get some rest, you two. You'll find the bathroom and shower in the back. If you need anything, please ring the bell. My room is the one next to the front door."

Kino thanked the old woman, who left saying that she had to prepare dinner.

Taking a seat on the bed, Kino unwrapped her thigh holster and took off her jacket.

"What do you want to do, Kino?" asked Hermes.

"I don't know. To be honest, the master's family didn't seem too happy to be

hosting us.”

“I don’t really blame them.”

“And they don’t really seem to want to tell us much.”

“I don’t really blame them.”

“So I’m going to accept the old lady’s hospitality just for tonight and leave tomorrow.”

“All right.”

After she took a shower, Kino was invited to join the family for dinner.

The master, his wife, and their son were sitting silently at the exquisite dining table.

The old woman alone was moving quickly, bringing one dish after another to Kino and the family. Vegetables doused in olive oil sauce and warm bread baked to golden perfection with a side of butter were among the many delicious foods she served.

“Dig in, Kino. I hope my cooking is to your liking,” the old woman said, leaving the dining room with a bow.

“Do go on, Traveler,” said the man.

The family sat at the table blankly, not even touching the food.

Kino slowly started on her dinner, keeping an eye on the master and his family. But one bite later, she froze—and began to wolf down the food without warning, cleaning off her plate with a satisfied look.

Once Kino had finished, the family silently picked up their plates and moved to the side of the room. There was a painting on the wall, which they lifted up to reveal some sort of a lid. The family opened the lid, which led into a chute, and poured the contents of their untouched plates into it.

Kino watched, unable to say a word.

There was a knock. The old woman entered.

“How did you like it?” she asked.

“It was very good. The chicken was to die for.”

“It was very good. Thank you as always.”

“It was very good.”

The family responded without missing a beat.

The old woman bowed with a smile. She turned to Kino. “How did you like the meal, Kino?”

“Hm? Oh, it was delicious. I could barely stop eating,” Kino replied.

“Lovely!”

The old woman took the plates away and served raspberry sherbet for dessert before leaving the dining room again.

Kino was happy to dig in.

The family again waited in silence for Kino to finish before pouring their melted sherbet into the chute in the wall.

The man pressed the call bell. The old woman entered.

“We’re retiring for the night. Please make yourself at home, Traveler.”

The family left the dining room. The old woman cheerfully put away the plates and utensils, and wiped down the table.

Kino asked her if she needed help with anything, but the old woman shook her head. “I’ll bring you something to drink before you go to bed, Kino. Do you like hot cocoa?”

“Oh, yes. ...Thank you.”

The old woman once again shook her head.

“No need for thanks,” she said, a smile rising to her wrinkled eyes. “Just being able to help someone makes me happy.”

“—and that’s how it went.”

“I see. But it’s too bad they tossed all that food.”

“Yeah. I almost begged them to share with me if they weren’t going to eat it.”

“So what are they doing now?”

“I think they turn in early for the night. The old lady told me not to go up to the second floor.”

“What do you think?”

“Well, they’re certainly not a normal family. But that doesn’t mean I can judge them with what little I know.”

“That’s true. You should have asked the old lady.”

“She looked a bit too busy to be taking questions. I can ask tomorrow. For now, I’m going to enjoy sleeping in a bed for the first time in forever.”

“Right. Good night.”

The next morning.

As usual, Kino rose at dawn. The weather was clear. After some light exercise, Kino did maintenance on her persuaders.

When she stepped into the hall, Kino heard sounds coming from the kitchen. She peered in through the open door and found the old woman cheerfully preparing breakfast. The old woman pounded the dough, shaped it into loaves, then lathered melted butter over them before putting it in the oven and flipping a large hourglass.

Kino gave the door a gentle knock.

“Good morning.”

“Ah, Kino! Good morning. Did you sleep well? I daresay you’re up quite early this morning. I didn’t wake you with all this hustle and bustle, I hope?”

“Not at all. I usually wake up around this time. Do you bake bread every morning like this?”

The old woman never once let her hands go idle as she spoke with Kino. “Yes. I start off the morning with a new batch. The master and his family simply can’t get enough.”

The family came downstairs and sat down at the dining table. The man was in a suit and his wife a dress shirt. Their son was holding a small bag.

“Good morning, Traveler. Did you sleep well?” asked the man.

“Yes,” Kino replied. “Thank you for your hospitality.”

The old woman served them breakfast. Fresh-baked bread, a wide array of jams and spreads, sunny-side-up eggs, salad, and crispy bacon.

“Please don’t stand on ceremony, Traveler. Eat as much as you’d like.”

Kino did as the master said and piled her plate with as much food as she could possibly eat. And she enjoyed every last bite.

Like the previous evening, the family sat at the table in utter silence. And just like the previous evening, they eventually emptied their plates into the chute in the wall.

The man called in the old woman and had her bring in his and his wife’s bags. Then the family set out from home for the morning.

The old woman returned to the dining room. When she asked Kino how the food was, Kino gave a genuine response.

“It was the best breakfast I’ve had in ages. Better than any hotel fare.”

“My, you flatter me.”

“By the way, there’s something I’d like to ask you.”

The old woman stopped and turned to Kino.

“Yes?”

“Where has the family gone?”

“She says the master and his wife are at work, and their son is at school. They’ll be going out like this every day for the next four days.”

“Wow. Did she really tell you all that?”

“Yeah. Apparently the couple go to work at different companies, and the husband works near the son’s school so he drops him off and picks him up. So they’re not coming back until evening.”

“Huh. I’d like to know where exactly these people work and study.”

“In any case, what should we do now?”

“We’re not leaving? I don’t think they’ll tell us more even if we ask.”

“I thought about it, but I decided that I want to stay a little longer after all.”

“Sure, but why?”

“It’s a really petty reason, so sorry in advance.”

“Yeah?”

“...Lunch.”

Having unloaded all her things from Hermes, Kino pushed him outside in her jacket.

Next to the door, white bedsheets were flying in the wind. The old woman was squatting in the vegetable patch, working on something.

Kino propped up Hermes and went to the old woman.

“The potatoes will be ready for harvest soon. The master and his family love my winter recipe—bacon and potato gratin. I was just checking to see if I could start serving it today at dinner.”

“That...that sounds delicious too,” Kino said.

“I don’t believe this,” Hermes sighed.

Without warning, the old woman slowly rose and looked up at the sky, searching for the sun. Then she turned to the confused Kino.

“Perfect timing. I’d like to show you two something curious and magnificent. Do follow me.”

Before Kino could even answer, the old woman strode into the woods. Kino rushed after her, pushing Hermes along.

A narrow foot-trodden path led into the woods. Kino followed after the old woman with Hermes in tow.

Soon, the woods opened up into a clearing.

“Incredible.” “Wow!” Kino and Hermes exclaimed simultaneously.

The old woman stood by a cliff that dropped into a valley. The cliff face was a straight plunge down.

There was a lake at the base of the cliff. It was long and narrow with a clear green tint.

“Wow. This valley must have been carved out by a glacier,” Kino gasped.

Hermes also seemed to be moved. “I can’t believe there was a cliff so close to the road. I’m gonna have to be careful about speeding from now on. One wrong move and I’d be scrap metal.”

Kino nodded and turned to the old woman. “Thank you for showing us such an amazing sight.”

The old woman smiled and shook her head. “Not at all. I’m here to show you something else.”

Curiosity rose to Kino’s face. The old woman checked the sun again.

“It’s almost time. Take a good, close look at the bottom of the lake.”

Kino pushed Hermes to the very edge of the cliff and looked down.

The captivating green color of the lake slowly thinned.

And as Kino watched curiously, the lake became completely transparent.

Kino’s breath caught in her throat.

“Look!” Hermes cried.

At the bottom of the lake, submerged in the depths, was a beautiful city. Its streets stretched on in orderly lines, and stone buildings and apartments stood in clusters. There were half-collapsed high-rises and large factory buildings with holes through the roofs. Sturdy walls stood tall on either side of the city.

“A country...” Kino trailed off.

Slowly, and quietly, the old woman spoke. “Yes. These are the ruins of an ancient country. Sadly, it collapsed one day for reasons we will never know. Only around this time of day at this time of year does the sun and the lake align just so that you can see into the depths.”

Kino and Hermes were lost for words.

“It must have been home to so many people—people relying on and helping one another. But that’s all in the past.”

As Kino and Hermes stared in silence, the old woman spoke again.

“What do you think? Isn’t it magical, just like a city floating in the sky?”

“Yes...” Kino managed to say. “It’s really surprising. ...Thank you.”

“It’s delightful to think even something like me can act as a guide for a traveler,” said the old woman.

When the old woman said that she had to go back to do more work, Kino replied, “I’d like to stay and look at the city some more.”

“Then I’ll go ahead and prepare lunch. Do you like wild rice soup, Kino?”

“Yes. I’ve tried it many times on my travels. I especially love the diced chicken.”

“Wonderful. Then I know what I’m making for lunch today. Come back to the house when the sun is at its highest point.”

Soon after the old woman had left, the lake returned to its original color.

“You must have noticed, Kino,” said Hermes.

Kino nodded. “Yeah. That country...or what’s left of it—it’s not that old.”

“Yeah. Not old enough to be ancient at all.”

Kino slowly pushed Hermes away from the cliffside. “Say, Hermes...do you think that the country in the valley that we were looking for was...”

“Yeah. It must have been destroyed. We shouldn’t have come on a story from a man that old. His information was too dated.”

“But isn’t it weird for the old lady to not know that? And it doesn’t look like she’s lying. ...I don’t think the family will tell me anything, either.”

“Maybe try going under the water? Or interrogating someone?” Hermes joked.

“Neither. We’re leaving tomorrow, as soon as we can.”

“Okay. Wait, not today? ...Oh, you’re staying for dinner tonight too!”

“Of course. It hasn’t been three days yet,” Kino replied nonchalantly.

Kino had lunch in the kitchen with the old woman.



She crumbled fresh-baked crackers into the wild rice soup and ate spoonful after spoonful, almost moved to tears.

The old woman, meanwhile, had balled up the remaining dough and baked it into bread. She ate the bread with soup made from leftover vegetables. “I always eat like this. It’s my favorite way to finish off the leftovers,” she explained. Kino watched her silently.

After lunch, the old woman bragged about the master’s family over tea.

She explained that the master held a very high position in a large foodstuffs company. That his wife worked in a company that made machinery, so she sometimes came home even later than her husband. That the couple’s son was studious and outgoing, and popular with his classmates.

Then the old woman went on to describe her pride at being a mechanical doll working for such an accomplished family.

After the short break, the old woman rose. “Now, I should go on and clean the house so everyone can rest comfortably,” she said. But as soon as she stood on her feet, she put a hand on her head and slowly curled up.

“Are you all right?” Kino asked. “Maybe you should get some rest.” She tried to help the old woman into a chair, but the old woman shook her head with a smile.

“I’m fine, thank you. I might need just a bit of extra grease. Now, I should really get to cleaning the house.”

Slowly, she rose and put the dishes in the sink before leaving the kitchen.

“You might as well do it, if you’re going to stay another day.”

“Fine, fine. Where next?”

Kino was outside the entrance, doing maintenance on Hermes according to his instructions. She tightened screws and bolts, and applied grease where necessary. Then she cleaned the lights and the fuel tank.

“All right. Perfect,” Kino said after a final full wipe-down.

“Perfect? Kino, my speedometer’s still broken,” Hermes complained.

“I’m sorry, but there’s nothing I can do about that. We’ll have to take it to a watchmaker.”

Hermes sighed. “So it’ll be a while before it gets fixed.”

Kino pushed Hermes back to her room. The old woman happened to be there, having just finished cleaning and making the bed.

“Oh my. I see Hermes is all cleaned up as well.”

“Thanks. But...”

Grumbling, Hermes explained his predicament. The old woman replied, unfazed, “Then shall I have a look at you?”

“What?”

“What?”

“I am a mechanical doll, you know. I always take care of the little repairs around the house... One moment, let me get the master’s tools.”

The old woman left the room and came back with a toolkit in hand.

“Even if you can’t fix it, could you please take a look?”

The old woman took apart the speedometer as Hermes asked and examined the complex clockwork inside. Then she said without even blinking, “Ah, this gear’s come loose.”

“Wow!” Hermes exclaimed.

“Er...can you fix it?” Kino asked. With deft hands, the old woman operated a tweezer.

“There you go.”

Then she restored the dismantled parts back into a speedometer.

“Give it a try, Kino.”

Kino tried pushing Hermes. The speedometer responded perfectly.

Stunned, Kino looked at the old woman.

“You’re amazing! Thank you so much, lady!” Hermes cried, excited.

“It looks like you’re in good shape now. I’m glad I could help,” the old woman replied with a satisfactory smile. “Now, I suppose it’s about time for me to go prepare dinner.”

“I still can’t believe my eyes.”

“But she really did fix up the speedometer. I feel so much better.”

“What is that woman?”

“Maybe she really is a mechanical doll. That would answer all your questions.”

“No way.”

“I know she probably isn’t, but either way...”

“Yeah?”

“It’s kind of weird to say this, but either way, she’s a big help.”

“Yeah.”

Like before, Kino ate her dinner without leaving a scrap on her plate. The family tossed their food.

Kino tried asking about the city in the lake, but all the family could tell her was that it had been destroyed too long ago for them to know in detail.

Telling them that she would be leaving the next day, Kino thanked the family for their hospitality.

“Tomorrow? I see...” the man said.

The next day. It was the third day since Kino had first come to the house.

Kino rose at dawn. She did some light exercises before stepping out. The sky was clear.

The old woman was not in the kitchen. She was not in the dining room, either.

When Kino went to the old woman’s room, she found the door ajar. She peered inside.

The old woman was lying collapsed just inside.

Kino rushed in and slowly sat the old woman up. Her eyes were still closed and her breathing was shallow. Kino carried her to her bed and lay her down.

“Ma’am, can you hear me?”

The old woman’s eyes fluttered open.

“Oh...Kino...”

“I found you lying in front of the door. Are you all right? Can you tell me what’s wrong?”

The old woman replied, “Yes, I know exactly what’s wrong with me. I think my components have reached their limit. It’s time for them to break down. Please, Kino. I want to say goodbye to the family. Take me to them...”

“No, you’re not in any condition to move. But I’ll bring everyone over. I’ll be right back!”

Kino turned and opened the door and found the family standing in the hall, as though they had been waiting there.

Without a word, they walked past the shocked Kino and stepped inside.

Kino watched them go to the old woman before rushing to her own room and hitting Hermes awake. She pushed him to the old woman’s room. The family was standing next to the bed, looking down at her without a word. Kino quietly put down Hermes’ stand.

“Everyone...everyone...”

“Yes?”

“Yes?”

“Yes?”

The family members replied one after another.

The old woman slowly opened her eyes. And she spoke, her eyes on the empty space between the master and his wife.

“Everyone...was I...helpful to you...?”

“Yes.”

“Yes.”

“Yeah.”

The master, his wife, and their son nodded.

Slowly, very slowly, the old woman smiled and whispered—

“Oh...thank goodness...”

With a long, quiet sigh, she closed her eyes.

And she stopped moving.

Kino placed her fingers against the old woman’s neck. The family simply stood silently.

“She’s passed,” said Kino.

“Yes,” said the man.

“So she was human after all,” Kino asked in confirmation. A hint of sadness appeared on the man’s face.

“Yes.”

“I knew she couldn’t be a mechanical doll,” said Hermes.

“What will you do now?” asked Kino.

“We will bury her,” the man replied. “Will you help us?”

They wrapped up the old woman’s body in a bedsheet.

The man brought the hourglass from the kitchen and placed it in her clasped hands.

“Follow us,” said the man.

The man and the woman carried the old woman’s body out of the house on a stretcher. The son followed with a large backpack on his back and four small shovels in his hands.

Inside the autumn forest was a narrow foot-trodden path. Kino pushed Hermes forward, following the family.

Soon, the trees gave way to a clearing. The morning sun shone brilliantly over the grand valley. The lake was glimmering green against the slant of the sun.

The family put down the body and began to dig a hole at a spot with a clear view of the lake. Kino assisted them.

Soon the hole was complete. The man climbed inside with the old woman's body in his arms. And he slowly lay it down. The son opened his backpack and took out a human skull.

It was a slightly yellowed skull belonging to an adult. The left side had been badly smashed in. The man respectfully placed the skull next to the old woman's head. Then the son took out another skull—this one belonging to a small child. Like with the previous one, the man placed it by the old woman.

The man then looked at Kino. "Her husband and son."

Climbing out of the hole, the man received a shovel and began to cover the grave. His wife and son joined him.

Kino stood across from the grave and helped the family.

The silence in the woods was broken only by the sounds of chirping, leaves rustling in the wind, and shovels against dirt.

Standing before the grave, Kino held a moment of silence before opening her eyes. Her lips had been moving, but she made no sound.

Kino looked back at the family.

"If you'll excuse us. Thank you for your hospitality."

That was when the man spoke, smiling.

"Aren't you curious, Traveler?"

"About what?"

"About the woman we just buried. About the three of us. About the city in the lake."

Kino fell silent.

"What do you say?" asked the woman, also smiling. "We can answer all your question."

"Please tell us," Kino said.

"I want to know!" Hermes agreed, excited.

"It's a rather long story. Would you still like to know?" the son said in a

strangely mature tone, his eyes glinting with life.

“Oh, yes. Please,” Kino replied with a hint of surprise.

The man, the woman, and the child exchanged glances and smiled.

“There’s something you should know,” the man said, placing his hands on his son’s head. He turned the head counterclockwise and, after two full rotations, pulled it off his neck.

Kino froze. Several thin tubes were connecting the head of the smiling child and the body.

“Y-you mean...you’re all...”

“That’s correct,” the woman said, pulling out her left hand with her right. The man put the child’s head back and pulled off his own.

“You’re mechanical dolls?” Kino finally asked. The man gestured a ‘yes’.

Eyes wide, Kino exhaled.

“Wow! What a surprise! You know, you’re all really well-made!” Hermes said, as cheerful as ever.

Kino was sitting on Hermes, who stood on his center stand.

“Now I know what you are. So please tell me the ‘who’ and ‘where’. The ‘why’ too, if possible.”

“Of course. Then let me begin by telling you about the country in the lake,” the male mechanical doll said, still standing. “You must have heard about a curious country in the valley, but no more than that. Nothing about the racial strife that had split the country in two since its founding.”

The female mechanical doll continued the story, still standing. “The conflicts did not stop at the political level. At times they led to bloodshed. The people of the country held on vain hopes for stability, but were trapped in this country because they had nowhere else to go.”

The child mechanical doll continued the story, still standing. “She was born and raised in this country. Do you want to know her name, Kino?”

Kino shook her head, looking at the three mechanical dolls who stood still

with their backs to the cliff.

The male mechanical doll said, “Over 50 years ago, she was a doctor of mechanical engineering living in that country. Though only 30 years old, she had been known as a once-in-several-centuries genius.”

“That’s why she could fix up Hermes so easily.” “Yeah.” Kino and Hermes nodded.

The female mechanical doll said, “Yes. she could have put together an entire motorrad if she had the right components. She could even create a fully functional 1/100 scale model if she desired.”

“Wow,” Hermes exclaimed.

The child mechanical doll said, “Dissatisfied with the research undertaken by the national laboratory, she founded a lab of her own. Her goal was the production of mechanical dolls. An unprecedented feat of technology—the manufacturing of service machines identical to humans in form.”

The male mechanical doll said, “She believed that mechanical dolls could free all people from labor. As a result, everyone would have more time and effort to spare. This would lead to them realizing that racial strife and conflicts over what tiny land was available was all in vain.”

The female mechanical doll said, “She dove into her research. But even her genius was not enough to realize her dreams. So she spent the vast majority of her time in her laboratory, with little time to spend with her beloved husband and their precious son. We watched it all from within our cases.”

The child mechanical doll said, “She would gaze at photographs of her family as she undertook her research. And eventually, she succeeded in developing three mechanical dolls with flawless specifications.”

“I see.”

“That was you, wasn’t it?”

The male mechanical doll nodded and continued.

“Overjoyed, she pulled us into her arms. We rushed back to her apartment by car together to meet the people to whom she wanted to show the fruits of her



labor first. She was smiling, saying that she did not contact them beforehand because she wanted to surprise them. And we arrived. The apartment was gone. In its place were the remnants of a massive explosion and the ruins of a building. It was a terrorist attack caused by the racial conflicts.”

Kino and Hermes listened in silence.

The female mechanical doll narrowed her eyes and continued.

“She leapt out of the car and rushed to the apartment. Examining the corpses one by one, she eventually found her husband, with his head caved in, and her son’s upper body. She smiled at us. ‘My husband and our son are waiting. Let’s all celebrate together once we’re inside.’ Before we could stop her, she went back into the crumbling ruins and was caught in a cave-in, buried in bricks. We rescued her, moved her back to the lab, and treated her. She was in critical condition for days, but managed to regain consciousness. But the person who greeted us was no longer our creator.”

The child mechanical doll continued, looking as though about to cry.

“The moment she opened her eyes, she asked me, ‘What time is it?’ When I told her the time, she replied, ‘Oh my. It’s almost time for the master to return. I should start preparing dinner.’ And tried to rise from bed in spite of her wounds. I quickly administered a sedative. That was all I could do. The next time she awoke, she asked us, ‘Are you the family that is employing me?’ She asked us many times over. We finally responded, ‘Yes. That’s correct. But you’re currently incomplete. Please wait a little longer.’ We delved deep into her brain to find out what had happened to her, to try and restore her to her original self, but we failed. If only she had been a mechanical doll, we would have been able to pinpoint and solve the problem.”

“What happened afterwards?” asked Kino.

The male mechanical doll looked at his fellows and said, “As we waited for her body to heal, the civil unrest worsened further. Not a day passed without another attack or a revenge bombing. We took shelter in the laboratory basement for her safety. Soon, an atrocious civil war began. And one day, the booming noises that had continued overhead for days came to a sudden end. The population had dropped so much and so quickly that the country could no

longer function. For some time, people tried to live in small groups. But even those groups were torn apart by conflicts over food, and the survivors abandoned the country and fled. What happened to them is of no concern to us, but if rumors of the country's destruction has not spread to travelers, it must mean that they..."

"Of course." Kino nodded.

"We brought her back aboveground. She said to us, smiling, 'Oh my, look at this mess! I'm sure it will be worth all the effort of cleaning it up.' We told her, 'No, we are moving. We are moving to a wonderful place in the woods outside the valley. Please come work for us there.' And for the next 54 years and 341 days, we played the part of a family."

"I see..." said Kino.

"Where did the lake come from?" asked Hermes.

"We did not wish for her to remember her painful past. So we constructed a dam and submerged the country. We did not anticipate that the water would become completely clear at certain times under certain conditions."

"Did you know that she was growing weaker?" Kino asked.

One of the dolls replied, "Yes. We have always been monitoring her health. But age was one factor we could not counter. There...was nothing we could do."

Once the mechanical dolls had explained everything, Kino spoke.

"I have no further questions. Hermes and I will gather our things and depart."

At that moment, the mechanical dolls spoke in unison.

"We were created by her hand to serve humans. Yes. To serve her. So now our role is complete. But a role is nothing more than a role! Kino, is there no role we could play for you? Ask us for anything. We exist only to serve humans! Nothing could be more painful than an empty existence!"

Kino replied, "I'm afraid there is nothing you can do for me."

"Please! You must have something! We can help you. We can be the people you need. We can be your friends. We can be your parents. We can be your children. We can be your lovers. We can be your servants. We can be your

enemies.”

“...I’m sorry, but I am not interested,” Kino responded plainly.

“D-do you truly not need anyone?” asked the mechanical dolls.

“Not at this point. I need no one but myself.”

“Ridiculous! Humans are tormented by solitude. Humans are tormented by a life lived for no one else.”

Kino shook her head. “That’s not true of all people.”

The mechanical dolls replied, “Please, let us be of use to you!”

Kino shook her head again.

Soon, they quietly muttered, “We understand.”

They turned around and slowly stepped forward. And they disappeared from Kino’s view.

Some time passed before she heard the sound of impacts on water.

Kino looked down the cliff.

They floated on the surface of the green lake.

The water slowly grew more and more transparent. At the same time, they began to sink.

With arms spread wide, they fell into the watery city like birds in flight.

# Chapter 5: The Country that Forbids Discrimination |

## -True Blue Sky-



“You should just ask the locals, Kino.”

“Yeah. That’s probably the best. —Er, excuse me.”

“Yes? Ah, you’re outlanders, I see.”

“Yes. We are travelers. We’ve only just arrived.”

“Really? Welcome to our country.”

“I have a question to ask you.”

“Yes? What is it?”

“I’m looking for a ——. Do you know where I can find one nearby?”

“...Pardon me? What did you just say?”

“I’m looking for a ———.”

“Excuse me, you are demeaning the people who work in that field. How narrow-minded!”

“Huh? No, I’m just looking for a ———.”

“My goodness! How could you use such a disgusting word? Look, Traveler. Please stop using that term. It’s offensive to those people.”

“...”

“Kino?”

“Er...then let me use another word.”

“Please do.”

“Er...does this country have a ———? Or maybe a ———? I’d just like to know.”

“How awful! Please, put yourself in their shoes and think about how you would feel if someone called you that! Everyone, look over here!”

“Hm? What is it?”

“What’s going on?”

“Why are you raising your voice?”

“Huh?”

“Is something wrong?”

“Listen, everyone. This traveler just said some awful things! The most offensive words you could think of...it’s barbaric!”

“There’s no need for such overreaction, now... Excuse me, are you the traveler? The one who was speaking to the madam here?”

“Yes. It seems she was not happy with my tone.”

“Hm. Simply an overreaction, perhaps. What was it that you wanted to say?”

“Er, I was simply asking about finding a ———.”

“Wh-wh-what...? Traveler, how could you say such a word without a hint of remorse? What you just said is highly offensive towards certain occupations and groups!”

“Er...I’m just looking for a ——— where I can ——— a ———.”

“E-enough, Traveler! One more utterance, and we will have you face legal recourse!”

“Yeah!”

“Stop it!”

“Ignorant bigot!”

“Huh? Am I a ———?” What do you think, Hermes?”

“Kino, maybe it was ———? That’s why they think you’re ———. Over here, saying words like ——— or ——— makes you a ———.”

“Even the motorrad! Like rider, like vehicle, I see!”

“You don’t deserve to exist, you monster. What is wrong with you?”

“I think there’s been some sort of misunderstanding, everyone. Let me phrase it differently, please. I was trying to talk about ———. Is a ——— not a ———?”

“Eek!”

“This has got to qualify as a hate crime!”

“See? I told you!”

“Hm. This is hopeless. There’s no cure for this intolerant attitude.”

“Keep that hateful traveler away from the children!”

“Let’s go, sweetie. Nothing to see here.”

“This is a bit of a problem. Say, Hermes? Can you think of a different way to put that word?”

“How about ‘———’?”

“In the ‘———’ sense, right?”

“Oh, how awful! How could you say such things?!”

“Enough is enough! We cannot condone your use of such bigoted words, Traveler! Stop this right now, or else!”

“Or else what?”

“...Ah! A-are you threatening me with that hand persuader you’ve got? What, do you think I’m going to stab you or something? Don’t make me laugh! I just happened to take out my knife because it was poking at me from inside my pocket! Don’t assume the worst of everything you see, you miserable excuse for a human being!”

“That’s right. Only a barbarian tries to solve everything with violence!”

“Yeah. I’m willing to bet this thug’s killed countless people just for having a different opinion. A cold-blooded murderer is what you are!”

“You should’ve heard the things out of this traveler’s mouth. The most abusive language you’ve ever heard, cruel beyond all measure. The poor creature probably doesn’t even know how much pain these words are causing.”

“I understand completely, traveler. Your discriminatory worldview makes me sad, not angry. Your parents must have been monsters who never taught you right from wrong. Or maybe you were so impoverished that they never had the chance to teach you. Your father must have been an alcoholic and your mother must have run off with a younger man.”

“Hmm... I think I understand what you’re getting at, everyone. My — — — is — — —.”

“I think they mean — — —, Kino.”

“Again with the hate speech! Get out. Get out of this country! There’s no room here for intolerant bigots like you! Words cannot express the anger I feel on behalf of those you are hurting. I would tear you to shreds, but we are a rational people. You may not deserve this mercy, but we will be content to exile you. So get out before we lose our patience! Everyone! Let’s work together and throw this hateful barbarian out of our country!”

“Get out! Leave!”

“You piece of shit!”

“Monster! You’re a murderer!”

“Leave us in peace!”

“Take this, you miserable brat!”

“Please, that’s enough.”

“Wh-what are you staring at me for? I-I was just picking up a rock I found on the ground. Can’t have any kids tripping over it. D-don’t get the wrong idea!”

“That’s right! He’s a good man, I can guarantee that! Not a hateful and abusive bigot like this traveler!”

“Leave us! Get out of our sight! And don’t die until you’ve left our borders! Hope the maggots enjoy your flesh! There’s not enough air in here for your discrimination and intolerance!”

“Yeah! Stop polluting our beautiful country with your dogma! You make me sick!”

“Just listening to this traveler reminds me of that dictator who massacred tens of thousands of people because of his own twisted ideology. I’m shaking. It’s almost like that monster’s come back to life.”

“Yeah. ...Look, Traveler. Leave our country right this instant. And remember that verbal abuse is just as evil as physical abuse. Don’t ever come back—you’ll spread your intolerance to our children.”

“Get outta here!”

“Leave us alone!”

“Go away!”

“Buzz off!”

“We don’t want you here!”

“That’s too bad. If you’ll excuse us, then. Goodbye. I hope your ——— are ———.”

“My word!”

“Hateful to the end!”



“Leave! Go!”

“Get out! Get out!”

“Let’s go, Hermes.”

“Yeah. Bye, everyone.”

“Finally, they’re gone. Hopeless nutcases.”

“It’s sad to see that people still think that way in this day and age. I suppose you can’t expect anything else from an outlander.”

“But let’s look at the bright side. At least you won’t find people that bigoted here..”

“What were the immigration officers thinking, letting a monster like that inside? Bigots should be herded into hospitals.”

“Yeah.”

“Why can’t they do a better job? It’s not like we get a lot of visitors to begin with.”

“There’s no sense in expecting intelligence from immigration officers. They might as well be chimps.”

“True. All occupations are equal and no job should be subject to discrimination, but immigration officers are the exception. But there’s no cure for being born stupid.”

“Is it true that immigration officers don’t know their numbers? That they can’t count more than the fingers on their hands?”

“I’ve heard that, yeah.”

“Are they idiots?”

“They live such long lives for stupidity incarnate, though. Twice the average lifespan, they say.”

“I didn’t know that. How is that possible?”

“Probably because they don’t use their brains. That’s why they don’t age. But it’s not like living to be really old is always a good thing.”

“Yeah.”

“True.”

“It’s crazy how they can live outside the wall, in those barbaric conditions. I heard they only come inside once a month on payday to do their shopping. So that means they live outside the wall the rest of the time, right? What do they *do*?”

“You know what? There’s nothing more fitting than a barbaric world for those born barbarians.”

“Hah hah! True enough, Uncivilized people will never adapt to life in a civilized society.”

“But you know, they marry normal people from inside the country, mostly people with no parents or relatives. And get this, they pick young girls, only just old enough to marry.”

“Disgusting. They’re practically kidnapping those girls and never letting them back inside.”

“Sick bastards.”

“Ugh. Just kill them already.”

“The people who marry them only come in once a month, too.”

“Eek! I’m getting the chills just thinking about it. I almost want to know how they live out there.”

“Apparently they wear hats and masks and gloves when they come inside, and never take them off even in the middle of summer. Doesn’t it just give you the creeps? Even when they run into people they know, they never say a word about what their lives outside are like.”

“Scary.”

“I’m so glad I wasn’t born one of them.”

“Yeah. If you’re born into one of their families, you’re stuck with the job. It’s awful. I would have killed myself if I were.”

“Actually, even they have the legal right to choose their work. In theory, they

could become anything in here. But I don't think they could possibly do anything other than guard the gates. It'd be something to see if one of them suddenly said they wanted a normal job."

"I don't think it'd be so amusing. If an immigration officer sent an application to my company, I'd just tell him that his application was lost in an unfortunate accident. I don't want them tracking filth into my workplace."

"Which is only reasonable. I would do the same. Reject their applications even if they do well on the entrance exam, perhaps. We would lose all our customers if we were to hire an immigration officer."

"That's enough about the human garbage, everyone. You'll spread the negativity. We just have to keep living with our great culture of tolerance. No need to pity those who haven't received the privilege of being born into such a wonderful country."

"Right."

"That's true."

"Yeah."

"Now let's get on with our lives."

\*

There was a small guard station next to the gates.

A man sat there. He was reading at an unhurried pace. He was about 30 years of age, wearing a white button-down shirt embroidered with the words 'immigration officer'.

Kino knocked on the guard station door. The guard put down his book and got out of his chair.

"Pardon me, but I'd like to leave the country now. What are the exit procedures?" Kino asked.

The officer smiled. "No need for exit procedures, Traveler. I never filed entry papers for you to begin with," he said, "Do you understand what I meant now?"

Kino nodded. "Yes. I've been to many countries, but I've never left one as

quickly as I did today. This is a new record.”

“I wager that record’s never going to be broken. That’s just how the people in this country are.”

“They all sounded completely serious. Was the ——— really what bothered them?”

“That’s right. But it wasn’t always like this. Not until the leader of the country commanded that ——— were ———, so they should not be ———. That’s how it’s been ever since. The ——— must be ———.”

“I see,” Kino said with a nod.

“I finally get it,” Hermes agreed.

“Sorry you came all this way just to get treated so badly, Traveler. I hope you won’t let it bother you too much.”

“Not at all!” Kino replied, smiling, “It was very fun.”

The officer nodded, also smiling. “I knew you’d say that. All the other travelers say so too.”

“And the wall is amazing, too. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Yeah.” The officer nodded.

They looked up at the grey wall, which had no openings in sight save for the gates before them. The wall drew a gentle curve and merged with the wall on the opposite end of the country. In other words, the entire country was surrounded by a massive concrete dome.

“It’s completely enclosed. I was shocked to see what it was like inside.”

“It looks like a huge egg. I thought it was a mountain at first,” Hermes remarked.

Kino asked, “When was it built?”

“I wish I knew,” said the officer. “It’s been around since at least my great-great-great-great grandfather’s time. It was in some of the pictures he drew.”

“Wow.”

Kino looked up at the wall again.

“It was so dirty inside. Not the people, but the city,” said Hermes.

The officer nodded passionately. “Isn’t it? The entire country is filthy. It’s completely shut off, and the people there have no grasp of basic hygiene. You might have seen it there, but people just dump trash and dirty water in the streets. There’s one river to the north—the area upstream is really clean with lots of fish, but the further downstream you go, the water gets dirtier until it’s pitch-black and you can’t tell what’s in it. You can’t touch that stuff. There are rats in every house and chronic cockroach infestations too.”

“What is a cockroach?” asked Kino.

The officer held up his thumb and index finger. “A bug, about this big. It’s flat and oval and shiny. You see them mostly around the kitchen.”

“Have you never seen a cockroach before, Kino?” asked Hermes. Kino shook her head. “No.”

“Then you’re very lucky, Kino,” said the officer, “Just the sight of those things in the dining room or bedroom gives me the chills. It’s nothing strange to the people here, though. I once went to a hotel restaurant and opened up a pot to find a few of the darned things boiled in my— Let’s stop this,” he groaned, waving his hand.

“I see... I’m almost curious to see what it’s like.”

“No you’re not. Sometimes, ignorance is bliss. Especially when cockroaches are involved.”

“Really?” Kino asked, showing genuine curiosity. The officer gave a wry grin and nodded.

“Personally, I don’t know how those people can stand living in there,” he said. “I can’t survive inside for long, even with gloves and a mask. But...the people there live their whole lives without ever seeing the outside world. That’s normal to them, and they think it’s a good thing. That’s how they’ve been taught. People living in a utopia don’t dream of paradise.”

“I see,” Kino replied, looking away from the wall.

She saw a bright blue sky and a vibrant green plain stretching into the distance. A cool breeze shook the grass. The road led east, lined by well-kept fields which eventually gave way to a dark coniferous forest.

A short distance from the wall was the officer's house, a wooden home built by a small river. A waterwheel turned lazily in the currents. A woman who seemed to be his wife was hanging up clothes to dry. Next to her, two children were playing on wooden swings.

"It's lovely here," said Kino.

"Thank you. I love it here too."

"You'd live a long life too, Kino, if you settle down here," Hermes joked.

The officer chuckled with a nod. "You might. Most immigration officers live long enough to see their grandkids, but the people inside can barely survive to see their children finish school. Most die of illness. The terrible sanitation and air quality does that to you. Basically, it's dangerous in there. There are no wild animals or wars, but it's dangerous all the same."

Kino nodded lightly several times, and looked out at the plains.

"Follow the wall north and you'll find a detour around the country. Make sure you drop by the guard station by the West Gate—my older sister and our cousin are in charge there. They'll let you stay the night and give you some rations and fuel for the road. And if you can, let them know that me and my family are doing all right here," the officer said, once Kino was ready to depart.

"Thank you. I will."

"Thanks for everything."

Kino put on her hat and straddled Hermes.

"Say, Kino," the officer said suddenly, "What do you think a 'true blue sky' is?"

"Pardon me?" Kino asked, turning.

The officer slowly explained himself. "A 'true blue sky'. You can think of it literally if you want."

"That sounds almost like a riddle," said Kino.

The officer nodded. “Yeah, you can think about it that way. The people in that country, they look at the painted wall lit by the countless fluorescent lights and think that’s the true blue sky. So I wanted to know how a traveler like you would answer.”

Kino thought for a moment before responding.

“I suppose my answer would be...‘there’s no such thing’.”

“Why do you say that?” asked the officer.

“The color of the sky changes depending on the place, the time, the season, and the weather. But it’s always beautiful. Of the countless skies I’ve seen, I don’t think I could call any a ‘true blue sky’. That’s why right now, I believe there is no such thing.”

The officer nodded and nodded again, his eyes on Kino. “Of course. So that’s an answer too...” he mumbled.

“Who was it?” Hermes asked.

“Who?” Kino wondered.

“My grandfather,” the officer said immediately. Kino seemed lost for a moment, but soon gave a nod.

“I see now. Your grandfather must have asked you the same question.”

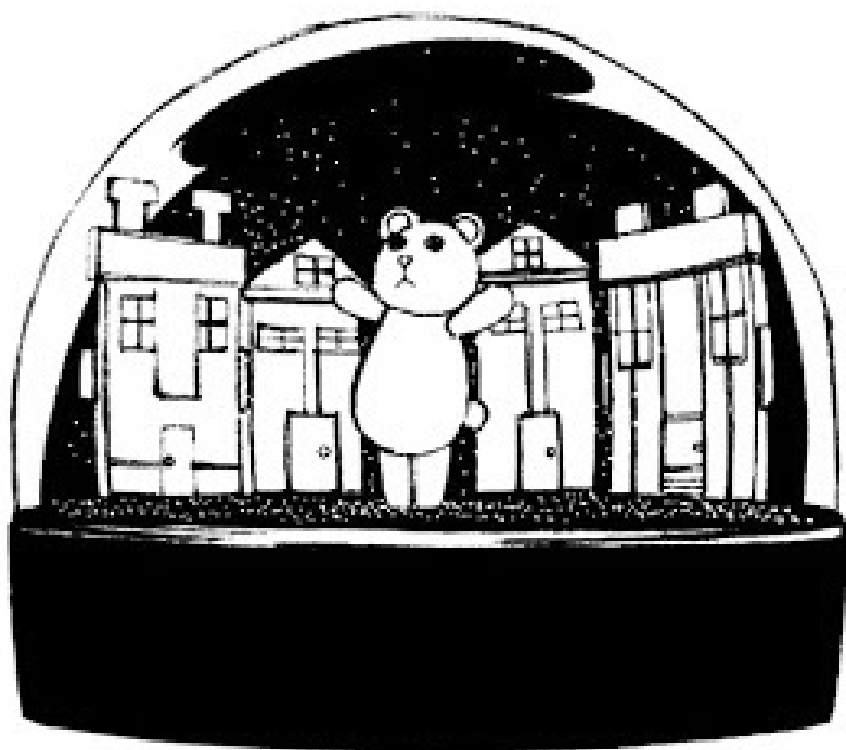
“Yeah. I was just old enough to understand, and he was on his deathbed. He said to me, ‘It doesn’t matter if you discover the true blue sky or not.’ When I asked him what he meant, he laughed and said, ‘Like I said, it doesn’t matter. Goodbye, Lügner. I love you very much.’ He passed away not long afterwards. Ever since then, I would sometimes wonder to myself what a ‘true blue sky’ actually means.”

The officer looked up at the blue sky, his back to the concrete wall.

“Maybe your answer is right, Kino, or maybe not. But either way...I’m glad I asked. Thank you,” he said, his eyes on the sky.

“Not at all. The blue sky here is very beautiful too,” Kino replied, also looking

up at the sky.





## Chapter 6: The Finished Story | -Ten Years After-



3 A.M.

My work is done. As usual, I clean up my manuscripts, put them into an envelope, and put the envelope into the lowermost drawer in my desk. They'll be there until my editor comes to get them.

I get off my seat and walk into the middle of my room. I stretch lazily. I extend my arms as high as I can, as if I am trying to make myself taller.

After making a sound like a kitten crushed under four of its siblings, I relax.

In an instant, the fatigue that piled up over 10 hours of hunching at my desk to write comes rushing over me.

I love this feeling of exhaustion.

The way I fall my bed feels different depending on how tired I am. If I sink like a rock into the mattress, it means I can spend the next few hours without having a single thought.

If I don't do that, my head spins. I find my mind drifting from one thought to another against my will.

Everything I'm doing now. My plans for the future. Things like that are bearable, but if I end up coming up with a new story, it's over.

Stories keep me up through the night. I have to lie in bed uncomfortably and coddle and plead with the ideas that pop out of my head and put them into sentence form on the notepad I keep beside me. It's not unusual to finish all that and find myself watching the sun rise.

Someone once said, "A writer is someone who works 24/7." I don't know who this person is, but there is no greater truth. Still exhausted, I take a moment to appreciate the quote again.

I just finished a particularly difficult job—I am very tired, but in a good way.

I collapse into bed.

*Thud.* My weary body bounces back up slightly, and finally—slowly yet surely—sinks into the mattress. I feel heavy. I don't even want to lift a single finger. But I move my hand very slightly to get my long hair out of my face. I'm still too young to die of suffocation, after all.

That's right. Tomorrow I'll go and get my hair cut. It's grown out a lot because I didn't do anything about it for a while.

Suddenly, I remember my teens, when I had very short hair for a girl.

It was a time when I was still living in the midst of gunsmoke, with a hand persuader at my side.

And I remember the day—when all too suddenly—it came to an end.

I wonder what that cheeky motorrad Hermes is up to now?

What would he say if he could see me, settled down in a country as a famous female writer?

That's right. Tomorrow I'll go get my hair cut.

Not as short as it was before, but I'm going to get my hair cut all the same.

My decision made, I fall asleep.

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A lone motorrad stood in the sand.

The sandy beach was dotted with rocks. Scattered across the sea was a chain of tiny islands. The waves were calm. The spring sunlight shining in the clear sky gently warmed the earth.

As the land grew more and more distant from the waves, the number of pine trees increased. Soon they became a great, thick forest.

The motorrad was standing between the waves and the forest of pine trees.

On its back was loaded a mountain of traveling gear. Compartments hung from either side of the rear wheel, and a large bag and a rolled-up sleeping bag were tied above it. A wooden plank was placed below the side stand so that it would not sink into the sand.

Someone sat crouched on the left side of the motorrad. A young person, likely in her mid-teens. She had very short, cropped blond hair and emerald-green eyes.

The human wore a ragged, patched-up jacket and pants, sandals with thick rubber soles, and held an automatic hand persuader in hand. There was a stock on it like a rifle so that she could aim for her target while balancing it against her shoulder and cheek.

The human anxiously looked out at the forests from behind the motorrad.

"Hey, I don't know who you are, but you'd better stop," the motorrad said. The human did not answer. She kept her persuader trained on the distance, eyes glinting in an attempt to miss nothing.

"Well, I guess humans have reasons, but you had to attack Kino, of all people..." the motorrad spoke again.

"Shut up!" the human retorted sharply. She then continued, in a slightly

diminished voice, "So that traveler's name is Kino?"

"Yeah. And this motorrad you're using as a shield is Hermes," the motorrad that identified himself as Hermes replied in a nonchalant voice, "Well, it's nice to meet you."

"My name's Inid...wait. That doesn't matter!" the human called Inid yelled loudly.

"It's nice to meet you, Inid," Hermes greeted her.

Inid ignored him. She stood up slightly and slowly peered out from behind the sleeping bag. She aimed her persuader into the forest and fired.

There were three clear gunshots, followed by three empty shells falling to the sand. Inid was using an automatic persuader that would fire three rounds every time she pulled the trigger.

"Tch."

"Did you miss?"

"Shut up!"

"With skills like that, you're going to end up getting shot yourself."

Inid snorted. "That's why I have you as a shield. You won't be able to move if your wheels are accidentally damaged."

"That's true, but considering Kino's personality..."

Hermes was suddenly interrupted by the sound of something slicing through the air. Part of the sleeping bag blew open as the feathers that were once its contents flew into the air. The bullet grazed the side of Inid's ear. White feathers landed on her golden hair.

"Kino would fire anyway, just like that."

Inid stiffened and took cover behind Hermes' engine.

"Do something, Inid."

"D-don't just say my name like that!" Inid yelled back, crouching down as much as she could.

"Anyway, why'd you attack us travelers in the first place? Just to let you know, Kino's flat broke."

"That doesn't matter. Attacking and mugging you is all I care about."

"What's what supposed to mean?"

Inid did not reply. Instead, she raised her head, her gaze tracking a figure moving in the woods. She then pulled the trigger again and again. Five bursts of three rounds. Fifteen bullets loudly ripped through the air.

"Damn it! He ran into the woods!"

"You missed again? You're not very good at this, are you?"

"Shut up!"

"Okay, calm down. You're not gonna win by getting all anxious."

"I told you to shut up! But I guess...I guess you're right."

Inid took a deep breath and lightly shook her head.

"Why'd you attack us, anyway?" Hermes asked.

"I wanted to be acknowledged as a real member."

"A member of what?"

Inid got down on her stomach and adjusted the persuader's muzzle with her line of sight as she replied, "Pirates. It's a rite of passage for the pirates who control this area. If you want to join, you get a test on the year you turn 15. You have to attack the first person you come across that day and mug them. If necessary, you can kill the traveler, too. If you don't pass this test, you'll never be able to become a pirate."

"I see. But what if the person you attack is really strong? What if they fight back?"

"I have to trust my luck. That's something a pirate needs, too, you know. So part of this test is to see if I'm lucky or not."

"I get it." Hermes replied, sounding impressed.

"Today's the day. Once I take down the traveler, I'll officially become one of

them. One day, I'll take my father's place as captain. So...so I can't give up here!"

"You're really desperate, huh?"

"Yeah. I've been waiting for this day my whole life. I don't care who it is. I'll win no matter what!"

Inid tightened her grip on her persuader. Her emerald-green eyes peeked through Hermes' engine and frame, into the heart of the forest.

"Come on out. You can't hide forever..."

Three seconds later, Inid's left eye was irritated by something red. She turned her head in confusion. A red light was etched onto her left shoulder--the exact place her eye had been a moment earlier. A laser sight was reaching towards her from between the engine and the frame.

Inid quickly moved out of the way. In that very instant, the forest was rattled by a single gunshot.

The bullet hit neither Hermes nor Inid. However, the plank that had been supporting Hermes' stand was blown apart.

"Whoa!" Hermes let out a shout. The stand buried itself in the sand. Hermes tilted, falling on his left side. "Ack!"

Inid twisted around to dodge the bag and sleeping bag that were falling towards her head. Although she was able to avoid them, Inid found herself pinned under the fallen Hermes.

"That was mean..." Hermes mumbled.

"Ugh!"

Inid desperately struggled to free herself from under Hermes, but her left arm did nothing but powerlessly clutch at sand. She tried pushing Hermes with all her strength, but he would not budge.

"Damn it! Why do you have to be so heavy?! Get off me!"

"Let's try to be reasonable."

Inid looked into the sky as she desperately pushed at Hermes.

But the moment she finally freed her left leg from under the engine, she froze.

The sky darkened. Someone was looking down at Inid. She could not see the person's face because of the sunlight behind their head, but the person had a large-caliber revolver trained on her.

"Damn it...so you had two guns..." Inid mumbled weakly.

Inid's opponent looked up.

The traveler was a young human in their mid-teens with short, messy, black hair, wearing a black jacket.

"You okay, Hermes?"

"I am, but I can't speak for your sleeping bag. How about you, Kino?" Hermes asked.

The person called Kino aimed the persuader at Inid, who was still stuck under Hermes, and replied, "I'm fine."

"That's good to hear. Anyway, help me up."

"Just a second."

Kino slowly turned to meet the glaring emerald-green eyes under the motorrad.

"Hmph! You can shoot me for all I care!" Inid spat.

"Let me introduce you, Kino." Hermes said, quickly explaining Inid's situation.

"I see. So that's why you attacked us out of the blue like that. A test for acceptance, huh..." Kino mumbled.

Still lying on the sand, Hermes chimed in like a know-it-all, "That's right. It's a 'rough of personage', like most cultures have."

"...You mean, 'rite of passage'?"

"Yeah, that."

"That didn't even sound similar... I think you're getting worse, Hermes," Kino replied incredulously.

"Really? As long as you understand, right? That's how language works."

"But it still takes too much time for me to figure out what you're saying."

"Really? I'm sure I did my part to help you practice your reasoning abili—"

"Hey! Don't ignore me, you bastards!" Inid cut in, glaring at Kino and Hermes.

Kino holstered the revolver, snatched the persuader from Inid, and quickly disarmed and dismantled it. Then, Kino took out a rope from the bag rolling on the sand and restrained Inid's wrists and ankles. Only afterwards was Inid dragged out from under Hermes.

Kino stood Hermes back up and attempted to balance his stand on some pieces of the original plank. Inid, meanwhile, tried biting and pulling on the ropes in an attempt at escaping.

Kino finally managed to balance Hermes' stand. At the same time, Inid freed herself from the ropes and lunged at Kino.

"Take this!"

Kino effortlessly dodged Inid's fist and simultaneously grabbed her by the collar. Inid was instantly thrown to the ground. An elbow bearing Kino's entire body weight slammed into Inid's solar plexus.

"Guh!"

Inid let out a strange noise and fainted. Kino lay her on the ground sideways and bound her wrists together.

"She just won't stay down..." Kino mumbled.

"That's some spirit she's got there. You should try and be more like her, Kino," Hermes comments playfully.

Inid coughed several times and sat up. She then glared at Kino, her face a mess of sand and water.

"Kill me! Just kill me! Right now! I'd rather die than fail this test! Come on! What, you can't? Don't be a coward!"

"She wants you to kill her, Kino. What are you gonna do?"

Kino gave Hermes a quick glance, then gave Inid a reluctant shake of the



head.

"Kill me! You're just going to let me live?! Take responsibility and kill me now, you bastard!"

Kino ignored Inid and headed into the forest to bring back another persuader. An automatic hand persuader was tied to a tree, and a long string was attached to the switch that activated the laser sight. Kino untied the string and holstered the persuader.

When Kino returned to the beach, Hermes was chattering to Inid, who was sitting with her head bowed.

"So what I'm saying is, you were just unlucky this time. You said it yourself, didn't you? It's all about luck. You don't need to be so disappointed. Er...I guess you can't help it, since you've always wanted to be a pirate, huh. Then I won't tell you to not be disappointed. But that's all it is. You have to accept the facts. You still have a long life ahead of you, and if you're lucky, maybe you'll find something you love even more—"

Between sobs, Inid mumbled, "Shut up...shut up..."

Hermes ignored her and continued. "You know, motorrads sometimes end up with new owners. Sometimes it might be unbearable because they have different riding styles. But that's like a motorrad's fate. So there's no point in resisting. Maybe it's like that for humans too."

Kino sighed.

At that moment, a small ship appeared from behind one of the islands dotting the sea. It sped over in their direction. Several men were on board.

"That's..."

Hermes took Kino's mumble as a cue to pause. "Yeah. Looks like they're Inid's friends," he said.

Kino nodded. "Good timing. Wanna run for it?"

"Yeah."

Grabbing a hat and a pair of goggles, Kino climbed onto Hermes and was about to start the engine—but was interrupted.

"Traveler! Please, wait! We don't mean to harm you!" A voice boomed from a loudspeaker on the ship. "It is our tradition to make reparations to those who become involved in this rite and survive! Please, wait a moment!"

The ship, along with the voice, closed in.

"What do you wanna do, Kino?"

"Maybe we should go, just in case."

However, Kino was suddenly interrupted.

"It's true... A pirate never lies," Inid mumbled, head still bowed.

Kino got off Hermes and untied Inid. But Inid still sat weakly on the beach.

The ship slid directly onto the beach. Seven men were on board, each armed with a persuader. But none of them showed any signs of hostility.

First, the men surrounded Inid and asked her if she was all right, voices full of concern. Inid looked away from them and silently shook her head.

A bearded, middle-aged man walked up to Kino.

"I am the captain of this crew. Please, take these."

The captain took out all kinds of valuable objects from the sack he had slung over his shoulder, and handed them to Kino.

Kino politely declined, explaining that traveling with objects that once belonged to other people might cause unnecessary suspicion.

But the captain insisted on making amends. Kino asked him if he could spare some fuel or ammunition instead.

The captain ordered one of the men to bring out some fuel from the ship. Kino filled Hermes' tank until it was nearly spilling over.

"Thank you."

The captain shook his head.

"I should be the one thanking you. Inid failing her test upsets me, of course, but it's thanks to you that she's still alive," the captain continued, "Once you had her restrained, you had her at your complete mercy. I can tell that someone

of your caliber could have killed her without batting an eye. So why did you spare her?"

Kino glanced at Inid, who was still sobbing on the ground. The rugged-looking men around her were crying alongside her. Kino looked back at the captain.

"I'm not sure."

"I see..."

The captain said quietly, eyes damp with tears, "Then let's say...that she was very lucky."

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So on that day 10 years ago, I failed to become a pirate. And I found myself living in a completely different world. Nothing had changed, but everything was different. The fact that I was no longer part of that life broke my heart.

I was still crying on the ride back to headquarters, listening to the distant sounds of the motorrad's engine.

Everyone was very kind to me. No one blamed me, laughed at me, or feigned sympathy. I would have killed anyone who acted that way, but in the end there was no bloodshed.

Afterwards, I went to a deserted island alone without telling anyone. It was a tiny place with no food or drinking water. I spent about 50 days there by myself.

I just sat there, doing absolutely nothing. I even thought about starving myself to death sometimes. I might have, too, if not for the others secretly leaving me food and water there. I'm still grateful to them to this day.

Afterwards, I was sent to a country that secretly supports the pirates, as per tradition. There I began a 'normal' life. I went to a school and studied for the first time.

Learning new things really helped me to get over my grief.

I finished school surprisingly quickly, and found a job at a publishing company surprisingly easily.

It was much more fun than I expected. Although I never had much of an

interest in books, I found myself reading more and more. Eventually I wanted to write them myself, and that became my job.

I'll never know if my life now is more fulfilling than the life of a pirate.

Sometimes, I see news stories or hear rumors about them. My heart aches a little every time, reminding me that I'm no longer a part of that world.

But...this is who I am. I'm not the person I was back then. That's how it will be until the end.

Ever since then, I've always kept an eye on the list of people entering the country. But I've still yet to see a traveler named Kino on a motorrad called Hermes.

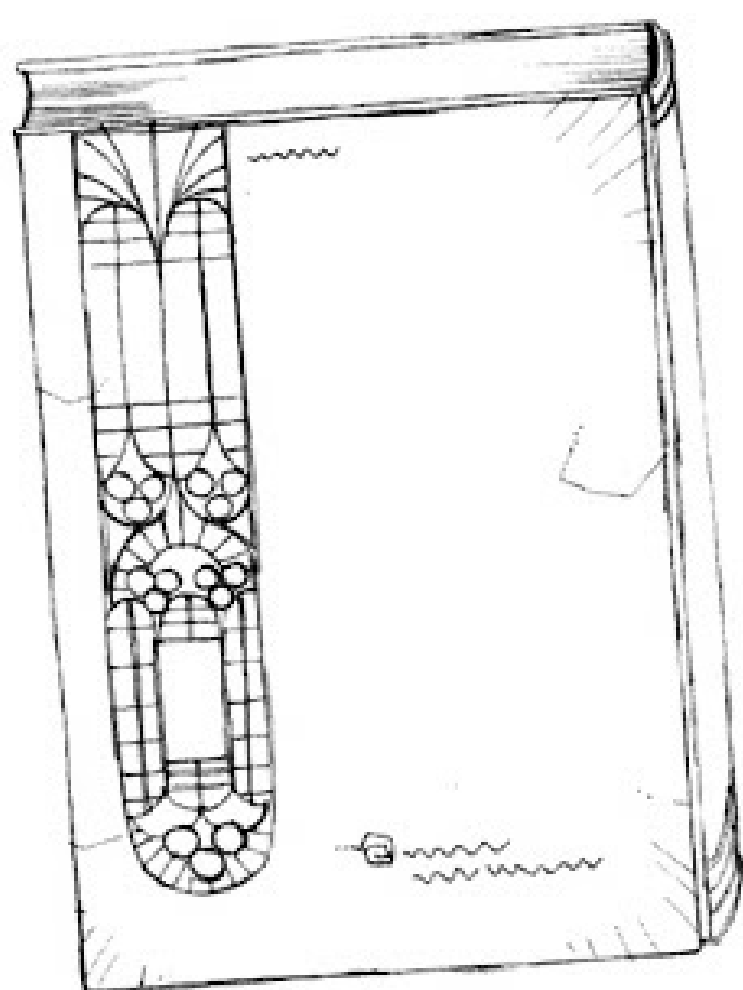
If I ever see them again, I'll welcome them with open arms.

They couldn't have run into bandits and gotten killed, right?

I know that there's no way that could have happened.

Now, I think I'll go get my hair cut.

Not as short as it was before, but I'm going to get my hair cut all the same.



## Epilogue: In the Clouds - A | -Blinder - A-

In the mountains, peaks still capped with snow pierced the blue sky.

Narrow ponds and puddles left by melting snow, and colorful alpine plants embroidered the vast slopes. Below the valley was a veritable sea of snow.

A lone road stretched up the mountainside. It was large and well-maintained.

Between the road and one of the ponds lay a group of humans. About 30 of them, counting both adults and children. Parked next to them were two trucks laden with travel gear.

Kino looked out at the scene from a distance through her binoculars. A gust of wind sent her brown coat aflutter.

“Well?” Hermes asked from the road, a slight distance from Kino.

“No movement,” Kino replied tersely.

“Was it bandits?”

Kino shook her head. “They’re all foaming at the mouth. And from the green tinge on their faces...”

“Yeah?”

“They probably didn’t know.”

“Don’t keep me in suspense, Kino,” Hermes urged.

Kino put down her binoculars and plucked an herb from the ground. She showed it to Hermes. “This herb also grows in the lowlands, but the ones that grow at high altitudes are poisonous. If you didn’t know that and boiled it into your food...”

Kino tossed the herb aside and looked at the corpses in the distance.

“...That’s what happened to them. It must have been last night.”

“Wow. So they all died,” Hermes said, astonished.

Kino narrowed her eyes. “I didn’t really want to see that,” she mumbled.

“Then close your eyes,” Hermes joked. At that moment, a strong gust of wind sent the edges of Kino’s coat flailing.

Kino held on to her coat and looked at the mountainside. A great white mass was ballooning in their direction. In the blink of an eye, it crashed over Kino, Hermes, and the corpses.

It was blinding.

# A Tale of an Afterword | -Preface-

This is a parody of the prologue of Volume 1 (If you didn't have the chance to read it, but know the anime, it was also the prologue of Episode 12).

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*The world has no afterword.*

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And then, an afterword was born.

There was absolutely no punch line.

Neither meaning nor theme could be seen.

Only the slow turning of pages could be heard.

“That’s right..., I suppose, but...”

Suddenly, the voice of a human was heard. It was slightly high-pitched, and was like that of a young boy.

“But?”

Another voice asked, encouraging the first to continue. It was a rather boyish voice.

There was a silence for a while, and then the first voice gently continued. Its tone was like that of someone convincing himself of something and it was directed towards a deserted place.

“Is an afterword something that is needed from time to time? Is it a completely useless piece of article? Is it a completely unnecessary part? I don’t completely understand why, but there are times when I feel this way. There are times when I am certain of it.... But during those times, I can’t help but feel that everything’s beautiful and fantastic, be it the text, the illustrations, or the frontispiece. Everything seems dear to me.... The afterword makes everything



else more and more appealing, and I figured, unreasonable though it may be, that the afterword has to be placed at the end of the book for that reason.”

And after a short interval, continued,

“Painful things, sorrowful things and jokes, that were cut off, can always be included in an afterword. Definitely, I have lots of such things left to write.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And that’s why I don’t think I can stop from writing afterwords. It’s so much fun that I would still continue even if I had to expose my foolish side. Besides,”

“Besides?”

“I can stop anytime regardless of my editor’s opinion. And so, I’ll continue.”

The first voice said decisively, and then asked.

“Do you understand now?”

“To tell you the truth, I didn’t get it at all.”

The other voice answered.

“I think that’s a good thing, though.”

“Really?”

“Though being an author myself, I probably don’t understand it well enough. Maybe I’m just confused. And maybe I continue to write afterwords to understand it better.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Now then, the afterword’s over. I have to write something for the next volume again. ...Until next time.”

“Until next time.”

The rustling of thin sheets of paper was heard, and eventually stopped.

Spring, 2001

